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**A critical analysis of poverty  
reduction initiatives in North West  
Vietnam: A case study of Son La  
province**

**MINH HAI PHAM**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirement of the University of Northumbria at  
Newcastle for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Research undertaken in the Faculty of Arts, Design  
and Social Sciences**

**September, 2018**

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### **List of Abbreviation**

ADB : Asian Development Bank

CEMA : Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs

CPC : Commune People's Committee

DEMA : Department of Ethnic Minority Affairs

PPC : Province People's Committee

DPC : District People's Committee

DOLISA: Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs of Son La Province

DOF : Department of Finance

DOET : Department of Education and Training.

ASEAN: Association of South East Asia Nations

FAO : Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

MARD : Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development

MPI : Ministry of Planning and Investigation, Vietnam

MOF : Ministry of Finance

MNRE : Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Vietnam

MDP : Multidimensional Poverty

UNDP : United nation Development Programme

VND : Vietnam Dong (The Vietnamese Currency)

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis focuses upon poverty and poverty reduction programmes within Son La province, North-West Vietnam. Ethnic minority groups constitute 86 per cent of the total population of this province and are disproportionately subjected to poverty, both within the province and the nation. A critical analysis of current poverty reduction programmes and their sustainability, with particular reference to ethnic minority groups in Son La province, is undertaken. The thesis then proposes a new, sustainable approach to poverty alleviation for ethnic minority groups in Son La province. Drawing upon original, primary, qualitative research conducted by the author, it is argued that the current poverty reduction policies in Son La province specifically, and Vietnam more widely, with particular reference to ethnic minority groups, have many limitations. It is contended here that asset based approaches are most suitable for the sustainable activation of growth and the reduction of poverty within Son La province, and the reduction of poverty amongst ethnic minority groups within Vietnam generally. The nation should formulate a holistic programme for improving grassroots governance in ethnic minority communities in order to improve the accountability of local authorities, based on voice enhancement for, and the empowerment of, local people and village institutions.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **THE RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

### **1.1. The significance of the research**

Human poverty has long been considered as one of the, if not the, most pressing problems in the world, with poverty reduction a huge challenge for national and international organisations across the globe. At the United Nations (UN) Millennium Summit in September 2000, eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were proposed, consisted by a set of proposals relating to, amongst other issues, global education, poverty and health. The eradication of absolute poverty and hunger was ranked most important. The MDGs were endorsed by the 147 heads of states attending the summit, international organisations such as The World Bank, The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and many international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). It is also important to note that, as long ago as 1990, The World Bank declared that poverty reduction is not only important in human terms but is a fundamental objective of economic development (World Bank 1990). The first MDG target was to cut the poverty rate of 1990 in half by 2015. In 2013, revised goals were set to decrease world poverty to three per cent of the global population, and to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030 (World Bank 2013). Subsequent to these agreements and targets, there has been some reduction in absolute poverty but progress has been geographically uneven. Thus, by 2013, we had witnessed some sharp decreases in extreme poverty in parts of East and South Asia but insignificant poverty reduction in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2014). Within this wider context, our focus in this chapter is to discuss the nature of poverty and poverty reduction strategies in Vietnam, and then more specifically within Son La province.

### **1.2. Poverty and poverty reduction in Vietnam**

Vietnamese history has been marked by a series of colonisation wars from the Chinese dynasties in the feudal period to French and American colonists more

recently. As a consequence, historically, the country has had limited resources to develop its economy and the living standards of its citizens. Following a declaration of independence in 1945 and the end of the American War in 1975, Vietnam has changed orientation from the wars against colonisation to a war against poverty and illiteracy. The contemporary aims of the nation are to get rid of disastrous poverty, obtain full employment and achieve prosperous living standards for all citizens

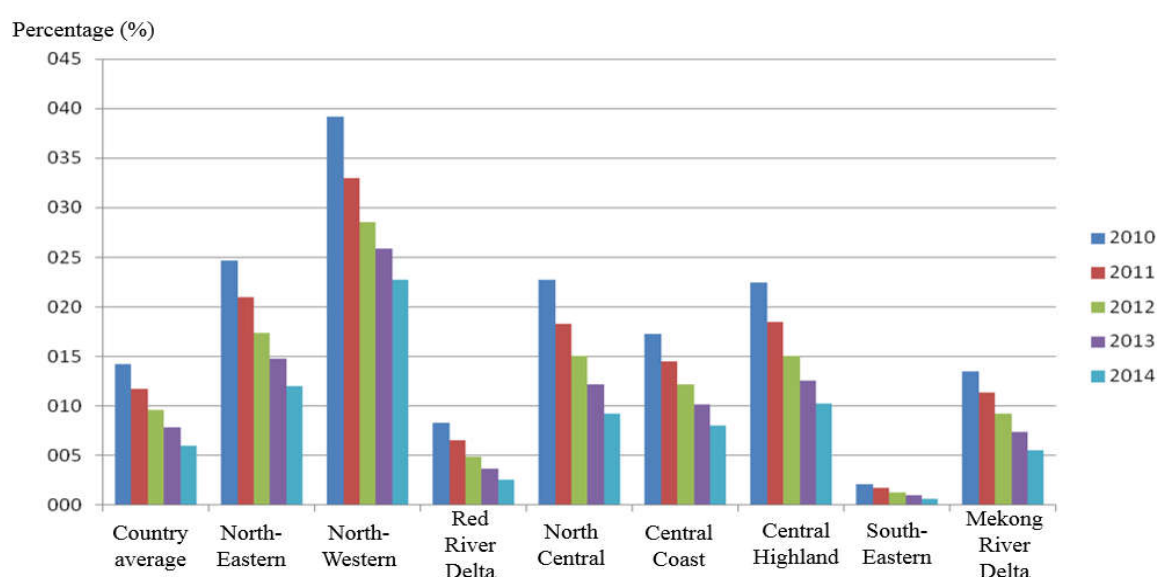
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From 1945 to date, poverty reduction has been a driving force of economic and political reform. Thus, the Head of the Central Steering Committee for Sustainable Poverty Reduction for the period 2011-2020, Vu Van Ninh recently asserted that ‘providing the poor people with tools to satisfy their needs is not an effective way to alleviate poverty completely. We need policies and measures for limiting risks and providing initiatives to help the poor escape from poverty themselves’ (Ninh 2014: 2). Furthermore, hunger eradication and poverty reduction has become more noticeable and received more attention from the 11<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress in the course of the country’s 2011-2015 development plan. The plan places particular focus upon programmes of eradicating hunger and alleviating poverty in remote areas of Vietnam, utilising diversified resources, such as human potential, community assets and faith bases to promote agricultural production and education, especially vocational training. The central objective of the above programme is job-generation ‘to ensure sustainable hunger eradication and poverty reduction’ (Government 2012: 229).

National attempts to reduce poverty in Vietnam have achieved some significant results. Mr. Bui Quang Vinh, the Minister of Planning and Investment announced at the 12<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress in January 2016 that Vietnam’s per capita income has increased four-fold and that the poverty rate has reduced from approximately 50 per cent to below five per cent since 1986. Vietnam slashed the rate of impoverished households from 58 per cent in 1993 to 5.97 per cent in 2014 and to below five per cent by the end of 2015, becoming an outstanding example of poverty eradication as recognised by the UN and the international community



(Vietnamnet, 2015). Moreover, the World Bank (2013) regarded the growth strategies of Vietnam as being ‘pro-poor’. indicating that the country has developed and conducted national policies to stimulate economic growth for the benefit of poor people. Nevertheless, poverty remains a critical concern in Vietnam and the gap between rich and poor is arguably larger than ever before. The income gap between particular population groups has widened, while the Consumer Price Index (CPI) has been increasing. This has led to a fall in the opportunity for many of the poor to access basic social welfare provision.



**Figure 1.1: Change in poverty rate in regions of Vietnam from 2010 to 2014**

*(Source: Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs of Vietnam, 2015)*

The progress of poverty reduction has certainly been regionally uneven throughout Vietnam. Using the official national poverty line as a basis, the above table illustrates that in 2010 the rate of poor households in the North-Western region was 2.52 times higher than that of the country’s average, and that of the Central Highland region was 1.6 times higher than the average figure. All regions of Vietnam witnessed a significant decrease in the poverty rate over the period from 2010 to 2014. However, Red River Delta and the South-Eastern regions experienced the lowest poverty rate of only around two per cent and one per cent respectively by

2014, which is often explained by the presence of urban central cities and the Kinh ethnic majority in these areas. In contrast, mountainous regions such as North-Western and Central Highland suffered the highest poverty rate of around 25 per cent by the year of 2014. These regions have the highest concentration of ethnic minority groups and are limited in terms of economic and technological development.

According to the Vietnamese Ministry of Labour (MOLISA 2016), ethnic minorities are now grossly over-represented within the official poverty statistics. This has been exacerbated recently by an increase in the poverty line from the Vietnamese government. Thus, following an increase in the poverty line in November 2015, the country's average poverty rate increased from below five per cent in 2015 to nearly ten per cent in 2016. The explanation for this rise is that the previous poverty line for the period 2011-2015 only assessed poverty based on income measure, whereas the updated one for 2016-2020 has not only focused on income but also the lack of basic social services such as medical care, education, housing, safe water, hygiene and communication. The MOLISA (2016) report on the updated poverty rate indicated that mountainous North-Western regions experienced the highest poverty rate of 34.52 per cent, following by North-Eastern provinces (20.74 per cent) and Central Highland (17.14 per cent). The vulnerability of these regions to poverty is also intensified by their greater exposure, given their geographical location, to natural disasters and threats, such as flood, drought, forest fire and persistent cold. As noted previously, the South-Eastern area has possessed the lowest poverty rate of 1.23 per cent and Red River Delta stands at 4.76 per cent. More specifically, the highest poverty rates are witnessed in North-Western provinces such as Dien Bien (48.14 per cent), Ha Giang (43.65 per cent), Cao Bang (42.53 per cent). The provinces having the largest number of poor households are Thanh Hoa (128, 893 poor households), Nghe An (95, 205) and, the province at the centre of this thesis, Son La (92, 754).

### ***1.2.1. Poverty and poverty alleviation in Son La Province***

Son La is a mountainous North-Western province of Vietnam with an area of 14,055 square kilometres and a population of 1.093 million. The province has 11 districts, five of which are placed on the list of the poorest districts throughout Vietnam. By the end of 2013, there were nearly 69,000 poor households, making up 27 per cent of the total number of households in the whole province (MOLISA 2014). This figure improved during 2014, reducing to 24 per cent. However, after the government's raising of the poverty line, the rate increased to 29.22% per cent - 81,260 households (MOLISA 2018). Son La has now become one of the three provinces with the highest poverty rate in Vietnam. Various strategies of poverty reduction have been attempted in Son La province over recent decades, but with little success. One of the biggest issues has been insufficient funding from central government. Inadequate allocation of financial resources alongside the limited capacity of local government hinders the Province People's Committee (PPC) to actively deal with poverty on a widespread scale. An alternative would be to try and reduce poverty with minimal dependence on direct financial support from central and local government, with Son La taking advantage of its own available resources.

Over the last few decades, countless agencies, donors and organizations have done their utmost to tackle poverty in Vietnam in general and in Son La in particular. Despite a multitude of projects and programmes, significant and long-lasting change seems elusive. The results of these poverty alleviation policies and programmes have not been sustainable. Why has sustainable change been so hard to achieve ? Addressing this question is one of the key objectives of this thesis, alongside generating some recommendations for progressive and long-lasting poverty alleviation.

### ***1.2.2 The significance of research into poverty in Son La Province***

Poverty reduction for ethnic minorities in Son La Province is traditionally likened to

a rooster, with government resources as the main body and residents as the legs. This analogy, highlighting the importance of government funding for poverty alleviation, implies that ethnic minority communities have been living under the burden of resource problems. We will be discussing, in subsequent chapters, the numerous attempts to reduce poverty undertaken by local government in Son La but, due to insufficient resources from central government, this has never been sustainable. As noted above, these difficulties have been further complicated by the remote geography of the province and the difficulties in communicating with ethnic people.

In order to thoroughly examine the current nature of poverty, attempts at poverty alleviation and future recommendations for sustainable poverty reduction in Son La Province, this thesis focusses particularly upon assets for poverty reduction emanating from ethnic minority communities themselves, an approach which is often referred to as Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). It is an approach to reducing poverty and enabling development that moves away from what is commonly referred to as a 'deficiency approach'. The research upon which this thesis is based aims to provide an effective channel for citizens to come together themselves and discuss the best approach for poverty reduction in the future. This will not only be a valuable contribution to policy-orientated debates over sustainable development in Son La, but it will also have significance for discussions and considerations of socio-economic development in poor mountainous provinces globally.

Although issues of resource mobilization and community co-operation in hunger eradication and poverty reduction have recently been under intense focus from policy makers, social researchers and many practitioners around the world, there has, to date, been a distinct lack of academic research into these issues within Vietnam. The main focus of previous studies has been to assess the achievements and drawbacks of the New Rural Development programme of the central

government. However, while some of the major obstacles to the success of this programme, namely the mobilization of internal community resources and community motivations to tackle poverty, have been signalled, they have not been deeply analysed or discussed comprehensively. Thus, Nguyen Tien Dinh (2012) discusses the improvement of rural areas through developing agriculture in Northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam but the overall proposals and solutions advanced are vague and do not tackle the above acknowledged obstacles. Nguyen Duc Thanh (2008), Nguyen Ngoc Luan (2011) and Trang et al. (2014) all discuss rural poverty in Vietnam and suggest the importance of mobilizing community resources but, again, very little detailed analysis is, or specific final recommendations are, advanced. Similarly, while there has been an abundance of research on poverty reduction for ethnic minorities in Vietnam in general and ethnic minority groups in Son La in particular, there is still little information about creating an approach focusing on different kind of assets inside the community. There is limited research on how to use asset-based techniques to address poverty, *the* major issue in ethnic minority groups in Vietnam and Son La province. This thesis examines poverty amongst ethnic minorities in Son La Province, analyses current poverty reduction programmes in the region and then considers whether an ABCD approach would alleviate poverty. This is done through empirical research within five chosen communes within Son La.

### **1.3. Research question and objectives**

#### ***1.3.1 Research question***

A research question is a key issue to implement a research project, giving general guidance to all steps of the research (Saunders et al. 2009). A research question must meet all the requirements of feasibility, clarity, significance and ethics (Biddix 2016). The central question of this thesis is: **how can Son La province address the poverty of ethnic minorities through the application of a poverty reduction programme ?**

### ***1.3.2 Sub-questions***

What is the current situation of poverty and poverty reduction in Son La in terms of ethnic minorities ?

What is the gap between policy and the reality of poverty in Son La ?

What are the strength and weaknesses of current poverty reduction programmes in Son La ?

What are the fundamental approaches for poverty reduction and community development amongst ethnic minorities in Son La ?

How might an ABCD approach be applied in the course of poverty reduction in Son La ?

How might an ABCD approach alleviate poverty amongst ethnic minorities in Son La province ?

### ***1.3.3 Research objectives***

The research project has a range of objectives:

1. To critically review the existing literature on community development approaches to address poverty, with particular reference to both ethnic minorities and Son La Province;
2. To critically review local government (province, district and commune) and national Vietnamese government reports on poverty and poverty alleviation in both Vietnam and Son La from recent decades;
3. To undertake primary, empirical, qualitative social research (interviews and observation) in several communes of Son La province to understand and analyse the living conditions of ethnic minorities therein;
4. To evaluate the results of both primary and secondary research in order to consider the application of an ABCD approach in the course of poverty reduction in Son La.

## **1.4. Research scope and methodology**

#### ***1.4.1 Scope of research***

This research project focusses upon an analysis of poverty and poverty reduction strategies within Son La province, through examination of five representative communes. This will then inform policy recommendations for poverty alleviation and socio-economic development within the province and the nation. Working with the selected communities, the intention is to identify significant and meaningful factors which have had a positive contribution to poverty reduction in Son La, with the support of advanced community development approaches and the deep application of asset-based methods within the province.

#### ***1.4.2 Research methodology***

The research upon which this thesis is based is qualitative, primarily interviews and observation gathered through empirical fieldwork in Son La province, Vietnam. During this fieldwork, the researcher interviewed many leaders and officers at the district and commune level, as well as local residents. Overall, 58 residents, eight commune leaders, four province officers, three experts of community development and poverty reduction for the North-Western region of Vietnam, three directors of community development departments at province level and three district leaders were interviewed. Four local resident focus groups discussions were conducted and many other informal meetings with residents and mass organizations in the chosen communes took place during the fieldwork. Participant observation in the daily life and activities of local residents was also undertaken. This all enabled an analysis of poverty and an evaluation of citizen involvement in poverty reduction strategies and programmes in the research areas. All of these research participants share common characteristics of working or living in the poverty effected areas identified above. Many also have experience of attempting to implement poverty reduction programmes and policies for many years. The chosen research sites for this study share a similar history with respect to poverty and experience of poverty reduction

policies and programmes initiated by local and central government. Therefore, the participants may well share similar experiences in the poverty reduction process. The commonalities will enable us to build a picture of current poverty reduction in Son La and how an ABCD approach is comprehended and whether it is possible.

Interview participants were selected by using a snowball sampling technique, with interviews conducted between June 2013 and July 2013, and then from November 2013 to January 2014. Some further research was then also undertaken, over a one month period, in June 2015. In preparation of the thesis, lengthy quotations and findings are used to contextualize the data by describing the themes and participants in detail. Together with Creswell and Miller (2000), the researcher believes that providing this context helps enhance the reliability of the research and will also enable the reader to make their own assessments on the applicability of the research findings to other similar contexts.

### **1.5. Structure of the thesis**

The content of the thesis is divided into seven chapters. This opening chapter, the introduction, gives a general overview of the subject, including the research question, research objectives and a commentary on the significance of the research. Chapter two focusses on the detail of the conceptual framework and conducts a literature review. Existing theories and literature covering poverty, poverty reduction and poverty measurement are all reviewed. In addition, the chapter also provides a critical discussion of previous community development approaches aimed at poverty reduction, including needs-based, faith-based and assets-based community development.

Chapter three involves both an historical and a contemporary assessment of Vietnam's economic and social situation, as a context for a theoretical and empirical



analysis of poverty and poverty reduction strategies. In addition, a picture of ethnic minority poverty in Vietnam, especially in mountainous areas, is highlighted in this chapter in order to signal the urgency of poverty alleviation in particular areas. This picture particularly demonstrates slow economic development and the deprivation of basic social services such as education, healthcare and other basic infrastructure in these places. Chapter four deals with the details of the research methodology. The research philosophies and strategies employed are recounted and discussed. The limitations of, and the ethical challenges of, the research project are also discussed here.

Chapter five is the beginning of the core of the thesis, where poverty in Son La is elaborated and analysed on the basis of original, empirical, qualitative research. The chapter highlights the key characteristics of poverty in the chosen sites. Poverty is presented as central to the experience of ethnic minorities within the research sites, with many experiencing this in a passive manner and depending upon government support. However, the research also reveals that the current understanding and assessment of poverty is not sufficient or comprehensive, requiring a need to develop a multi-dimensional approach to the issue. Chapter six focusses on the application of an ABCD approach to poverty alleviation in Son La province. The chapter examines the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in applying ABCD in Son La. Potentially successful aspects of prospective ABCD are also discussed, in order to propose the most effective poverty reduction strategy for Son La province. In the final chapter, the Discussion and Conclusion, a critical discussion of current poverty reduction in the research areas is undertaken, with policy recommendations, generated from the original empirical research, also being advanced.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON POVERTY REDUCTION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

Previous approaches to top-down development in Vietnam have failed to convey real, practical and sustainable development outcomes for individuals living in rural areas of developing countries. This has, in turn, forced the communist government to investigate the impetus for discovering alternative community development approaches. One of the most influential approaches that has been promoted is people-centred development, as it offers great opportunities for the highly focused participation of rural residents. Bottom-up development and religious development approaches have also received much attention from experts in the field. The overriding aim of this chapter is to develop a conceptual framework that helps to identify and evaluate thoroughly the role of these practical approaches in the community development process and in poverty reduction, with particular reference to ethnic minorities within the Son La province of Vietnam.

Firstly, the existing literature on community development is scrutinised. This will help clarify how the concept is defined. The next task is to discuss community development from the perspective of concentrating and building on community resources, and to demonstrate that this approach leads communities to a more sustainable approach to development. In particular, ABCD is put under examination thoroughly following discussion of several different approaches. Overall, the chapter will outline the chosen theoretical framework, which will then be used to address the problem of poverty in the chosen sites of this research project.

#### **2.2. Community development**

##### ***2.2.1. Definition***

Community development has been defined in a number of different ways. Despite differences among the various definitions, all of them suggest that community development should be accompanied by stable poverty reduction. One of the foremost definitions of community development is that provided by Phillips and Pittman (2009). According to them, this refers to the process of promoting and motivating the ability to act practically and collectively. The process of development is formulated from collective activities, leading to improvement in every aspect of life: society, economy, culture, politics and environment (Pittman and Phillip, 2009). According to McKnight and Kretzmann (1993: 18), community development is ‘the process in which the local capacities are mobilized effectively and identified thoroughly’. These local capacities include all assets within the community. They (1993: 350) argue that this aligns with the second rule of asset-based community development which involves ‘strengthening the neighborhood’s capacity to shape and exchange information’. Specifically, one of the best ways for the community to exchange information is to utilize and create various learning opportunities for all citizens. McKnight and Kretzmann present the concept of an ideal and healthy community as one where all local capacities are respected, utilized perfectly and recognized. For these, and other, scholars, the key determinant of a developed community is the active resident base, which is reflected in the ways residents utilize internal resources and apply them purposely for the overall development of the community. As Morse (2009: 17) argues, a community is considered sustainably developed when the residents can obtain the empowerment to resolve their own problems. This is also the key vehicle to enhance the civic change which must become the overriding factor in building and rebuilding communities for a better future.

### ***2.2.2. Six dimensions of community development***

Drawing upon the above literature with regard to the mobilization of resources and capital for the enhancement of effective collective activities to stimulate community development in a specific location, it is possible to identify six main

dimensions of community development: social, economic, personal, cultural, political and environmental. According to Ife (2002), some of these dimensions are of higher priority, depending on the characteristics and demand in each community.

Building on the above, the social dimension refers to health service provision, the standard of social work, educational opportunities and the quality of social interaction in a community. The economic dimension refers to the ways in which the community approaches global economic integration, for instance, by enlarging the scope of specific industries and/or attracting investment into profitable businesses, where individuals can improve their life through monetary income. The cultural dimension refers to the collective norms, values and rituals of the community and their collective cultural activities which can be themselves their own end. The environmental dimensions include the quality of both the natural and artificial environment. The personal dimension refers to the importance of developing a sense of personal worth in life, whereby people are able to enrich their mental and spiritual life thoroughly (Ife 2002). These dimensions are not mutually exclusive, rather, they reflect and interact with each other in a flexible way, in order to contribute to successful community development.

## **2.3. Poverty reduction**

### ***2.3.1. Poverty definition***

The definition of poverty differs widely in political, economic, social contexts, as do attempts to measure the phenomenon (World Bank 2013). In a very general sense, poverty can be defined as a situation in which human individuals are unable, rather than unwilling, to develop their full potential – economically, socially and culturally. A number of dimensions of poverty are often identified, the lack of

which prevents humans from developing their full potential, such as health, income, security, education and empowerment. In both rural and urban areas, and particularly in the global south, limited access to high-quality educational systems, constraints in accessing health care services, unhygienic living conditions, insufficient monetary income, lack of ontological security and the deprivation of legal rights and responsibilities are often seen as interdependent factors which produce living situations where poverty exists (Kessides 2002).

Poverty is famously and traditionally divided into two main forms, absolute and relative, which then informs attempts to measure it. Absolute poverty refers to a situation where people have a particular level of monetary income which barely enables physical subsistence and physical survival (Boirguigon 1999). Relative poverty refers to a situation where people lack income, goods, or are unable to satisfy human needs, relative to others within the same community, region, nation or internationally. It is the concept of relative poverty, although in many ways more of a subjective and contestable phenomenon than the concept of absolute poverty, which has been most usefully employed to measure poverty around the world, and which will be most commonly employed within this thesis.

### ***2.3.2. Poverty measurement - poverty line***

Contemporary poverty measurement centres around a poverty line as the main indicator of human poverty in relation to monetary income, the consumption of goods and the satisfaction of human needs. A poverty line generally marks the point below which a household or an individual will be considered to be poor and living in poverty. Poverty lines exist internationally, according to an international standard of living, but also within particular nations. These national standards are then often compared to the international poverty line. Furthermore, a poverty line within a nation needs to be adjusted to be appropriate within different locations within a country (UNDP 2015).

In the 1990s, The World Bank developed a standard, global poverty line. A one US dollar level of monetary income per day, the ‘dollar-a-day’ poverty line, was set, below which individuals would be identified as living in poverty. This amount was increased to one dollar and 25 cents per day in 2010 (UNDP 2015). However, these levels are susceptible to fluctuations in the prices of commodities and global income levels. For example, The World Bank itself suggested in 2005 that the global poverty line should be increased to one dollar and 45 cents per day. It is clear that a poverty measurement line the poverty line needs to be flexible to capture differentiations in living standards and frequent changes in monetary and consumer good values around the world. Furthermore, national, local and regional conditions can profoundly effect the accuracy of poverty line measurements and calculations. The definition and measurement of poverty must be sensitive to these national, local and regional dynamics (UNDP 2015).

## **2.4. Different approaches to poverty reduction and community development**

According to Brocklesby and Fisher (2003), from the 1990s, in order to propose development interventions towards poverty reduction, different development agencies and governments have adopted many strategies, including direct budgetary support, needs-based approaches, asset-based approaches and faith-based approaches. Needs-based approaches are considered as top-down development approaches, while asset-based approaches are considered to be bottom-up (Phillips and Pittman 2009). Many previous and influential studies (e.g. McKnight and Kretzmann 1993) have shown that involving the community in its own development is critical for sustainability.

### ***2.4.1. Needs-based community development approach***

Public services have been traditionally designed and delivered to individuals and communities through what has become recognised as a need-based approach. A

community development process happens when all residents of the community meet up to discuss and outline their main problems, needs or deficiencies within their community (Keeble and Meisel 2006). This action produces a list of needs and inadequacies in specific communities (McKnight and Kretzmann 1996). Needs-based approaches to development are conducted from this root and focus on the gap between 'what is there' and 'what the community is missing or what they want to be there' (Stocker 2012: 85). Under this approach, community development practitioners begin their efforts by conducting a needs assessment which examines the issues, problems, concerns and/or weaknesses of the community (Green and Haines 2008; Goatting and Green 2010). Within this development process, the participation of the resident is often ignored, and the policies are developed from programme managers, political leaders, and others, who come from outside of the community. Development practitioners using this approach begin from the premise that residents need help and support from outside and that, when given such aid, they are willing to change (Khadka 2012: 88). The intervention, addressing community needs, problems or deficiencies, is implemented in a top down manner (Kretzmann et al., 2005).

It has been argued that the above described traditional needs-based community intervention has many limitations that might stunt and constrain the overall development process (Brankin et al. 2003; Goatting and Green 2010). Community deficiencies are often measured through a needs assessment survey (Khadka 2012: 84). What should be done for the community is then determined by many organizations and local and central governments through the results of these surveys. As a result, the development interventions and outreach programmes tend to focus on the areas of the community that are defined as the most deficient. However, this approach does not necessarily build a complete picture of the community. This method does not only give social service providers an indication of the demand for their services, it can also have the side effect of creating hopelessness amongst local residents and within the community. As a result, the residents come to believe that depending on the service providers is their only way

of solving problems and meeting needs. The service provider becomes a 'seller' and the community members become 'customers'. This leads to a mindset among residents that they are dependent on the service provided by, for example, a local non-profit organization or an outside government. With an increase in dependency, households start to consider such service providers as their sole source of support. In addition, a power imbalance can be created in the community through needs driven models in community development. This means the residents will not partake in collaborative community development activities with equal resources. Furthermore, once the limited financial funds invested in these programmes become exhausted and constrained, it is likely the residents will fall back to a disadvantageous position once again. Moreover, if a development process just focuses on examining deficiencies and problems within a community, residents will, in turn, focus on what is lacking in their community while simultaneously missing the causes of these issues. It has also been argued (Phillips and Pittman 2009: 39) that needs-based approaches to community development can make people feel overwhelmed as they highlight many problems with little resulting action to resolve them.

Overall, the literature cited thus far outlines several major consequences resulting from the needs-based approach to community development. Firstly, it can lead to a fragmentation of effort on the part of service providers as each agency seeks to address the specific area in which they have expertise. Secondly, resources and funding are targeted to the service providers rather than to the residents. This may or may not be a problem depending on how the funding is used by the service provider. Thirdly, in advocating the cause of their community, neighbourhood leaders are forced to highlight community deficiencies and denigrate their neighbourhood because they realize that this is the only way to receive resources - to look desperate and 'in need'. Fourth, and most significantly, this model strengthens the perception that only outside experts are able to provide help to a community or neighbourhood when, in reality, outside resources and assistance may not be suitable to needs within a specific local setting (Goatting and Green 2010: 3).



Green and Haines (2008) point to several further drawbacks of a community needs assessment when it is considered as part of a community development model. Firstly, while the overall goal is to improve the quality of life for residents, it is difficult to establish long-term harmonious coalitions and partnerships when focusing just on community problems. Second, the model can lead to alienation, or a sense of powerlessness, or both. Residents will consequently become overwhelmed by the difficulty and complexity of community problems. Warren et al. (2001) continued this criticism, arguing that a needs-based approach fails to empower the community because it does not provide an opportunity to develop mutual cooperation and relationships of trust between people. By supplanting the 'bonding' relationships between resident and service provider and between neighbours with vertical, power-laden relationships, the needs based approach neglects the benefits of social capital that can emerge from face-to-face interaction.

Building upon the critical analysis of needs-based approaches to community development contained within the existing literature cited above, when attempting to address challenges and issues within, a community must be given sufficient opportunities for collective action and partnerships formed with actors outside of their immediate neighbourhood, in order to build the bonding and bridging social capital necessary for the mobilization of resources and services required to successfully address the issues which they are facing. Whether these partnerships can be successful or not depends on whether outside agencies and residents perceive issues for resolution, and the action to tackle them, in a top down direction or not.

#### ***2.4.2. Asset-based community development approach***

A different, and arguably more successful approach to community development which is discussed within the existing literature, and which has been applied in many countries, is the asset-based approach. This approach is often primarily defined as a 'bottom-up' method, characterized by internal resource utilization. However, there are a number of ways in which this general approach has been

interpreted and implemented. O'Connell (1990) points out that an asset-based approach is often initiated by a community organization which will arrange a meeting to investigate any influences from outside the community that may be able to tackle issues within it more effectively internal aspects, such as improved health care, improved education or greater funding for schools. However, the organization will also seek to draw out and build upon the collective strength from inside the community, which creates the real power to change the often difficult situations of members in that community. O'Connell (1990) argues that problems can be resolved thoroughly by thinking related to the creation and implementation of the vision of community members and participants, as opposed to following the traditional protocol of a needs-based programme in a top-down manner. As McKnight and Kretzmann (1993) acknowledge, while outside resources and support can assist communities with their development strategies, community issues can be tackled much more effectively if local communities fully use their existing assets and therefore own and hold the necessary resources. McKnight and Kretzmann (1996) contend that development has to start from within the community and that local people must be committed to investing in themselves. This asset-based approach has been introduced and applied in real community settings across the world.

In direct contrast to problem-solving and needs-based approaches, which highlight the deficiencies in a community and then attempt to tackle these through the cultivation of external resources, the asset-based approach starts from an assessment of existing community resources and then suggests how to mobilize these resources for the benefit of the entire community (Green and Haines 2008, 2012; Schaffer et al. 20006; Khadka 2012). Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) was, then, developed as a direct alternative to the dominant need-based approaches. The development of welfare, social services has been linked to notions of paternalism and political pressures. ABCD is viewed as an approach which aims to provide genuine power for citizens actually living in communities by harnessing the insights, capacities, resources and rights embedded in communities and regions to deal with difficulties and challenges within

those regions and communities, while simultaneously escaping the patterns of paternalism and political pressures and opportunism so often associated with state-sponsored welfare programmes and provision of social services (Saint-Paul 2011).

According to Mathie and Cunningham (2003: 474), ABCD is the process where citizens living in a community can drive the whole community by cultivating and mobilizing the existing resources inside the region, thereby building up remarkable economic and social opportunity. Foot and Hopkins (2010: 7), when discussing the asset-based approach, declared ‘the glass is half full rather than half empty. Fundamentally, the shift from using the deficit based approach to an asset based one requires a change in attitudes and values’.

A community is developed with the application of ABCD when the local residents accept to invest in themselves and their own assets in the region (McKnight and Kretzmann 1993, 1996). This model emphasizes relationships among neighbours, empowering social relationships when residents get involved in the characterization of existing resources and assets while collaborating with each other to expand and fortify such resources if needed. Kretzmann and McKnight, leading advocates of the ABCD model, state that ‘remarkable community development will take place only when the local residents are focused on putting themselves and their resources in the effort (McKnight and Kretzmann 1993: 8). The belief system of ABCD is connected to the understanding that individuals with abilities, skills and opportunities can exploit their own strengths to improve their own lives and that of their family and the whole community (Eloff and Ebersohn 2001).

#### ***2.4.3. Faith-based community development approach***

A further approach to poverty reduction and community development is the faith-based method. Within this, relevant authorities set about using resident religious belief for community improvement. The faith-based perspective focuses upon

individual, organisational and neighbourhood assets development, including both tangible and intangible assets, to solve problems and achieve specific outcomes, such as citizen participation in policy making, managing resources more effectively, improved service delivery and political empowerment (Rappaport 1987; Zimmerman 2000). While Safire (1999) has used the term religion-based community development as an alternative to faith-based development, the latter is dominant within the literature, according to Vidal et al. (1999). The faith-based term is comprehensive, covering churches and other religious organisations. It is argued that faith-based community development reduces the gap between religion and government, thereby reducing conflict within the social community. While the needs-based and asset-based approaches rely upon available communal resources, the faith-based approach considers spiritual organisations as its main power source. Following Vidal et al. (1999), these sources are divided into three categories, comprising congregation (including churches), an interconnected system of related faith organizations and detached sacred organizations.

There are several existing studies which focus on the relationship between faith, faith-based organisations and community development. Ayling (2013) points to the main features that make religion inseparable from the community development process. First and foremost, both faith and religion typically aim to achieve positive impacts within poor communities. Religious factors are often important to the experiences and perceptions of poor communities and they should not be disregarded by researchers. In fact, approximately 70 per cent of the global population consider themselves to be part of a religious society (Devine and Deneulin 2011). The faith issue cannot be ignored when examining poverty. Ayling (2013) also points out that faith-based organisations have paid attention to poverty throughout history, and long before the official establishment of ethical and constitutional sectors for dealing with the phenomenon. Furthermore, while non-religious organisations and institutions are often constrained by strict financial management, budgets and timelines, religious organisations can be more

independent and flexible with their resources in relation to poverty reduction. The faith-based approach brings a different lens to poverty alleviation when compared to the top-down (needs based) and bottom-up (asset-based) approaches and it should not be neglected, it is an important dimension (Devine and Deneulin 2011; Ayling 2013).

## **2.5. The relevance of ABCD for poverty reduction and community development**

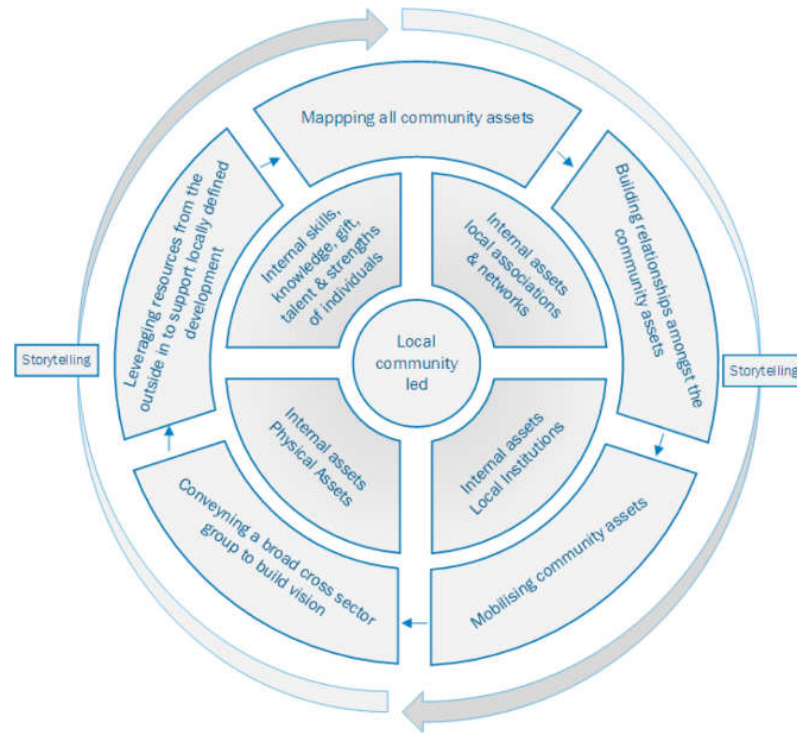
### ***2.5.1. ABCD approach***

According to Shin et al (2014), in order to achieve the development of community capacity through an ABCD approach, the community is obliged to adopt a procedure involving three important steps, the so-called asset mapping process. The first step is to identify community assets. The second step is to precisely map the assets of the community fully and the final step is to mobilise the assets and resources of community in order to make them available to work toward positive change (Ennis and West 2010). According to the above authors, these steps are to be implemented strictly, allowing the exploitation of resources inside the community. Smart and efficient asset mapping is required to ensure the efficient utilisation of internal assets when addressing community poverty.

Every community has its own combination of assets, thus mapping these assets begins with an inventory of the gifts and skills of individuals who reside in that community (McKnight and Kretzmann 1993). This is comprised of three main aspects: whole assets; storytelling; heritage focus. In more detail, the whole asset approach refers to the action of getting out of the community to investigate which kinds of asset are currently existing in the interconnected or surrounding areas. Storytelling garners information from local residents real life experience, thereby shaping the goals of community thoroughly. The heritage approach takes account of the most significant features which have played an important role in transforming the community in positive ways historically (Guy, Fuller and Pletsch 2006).

In developing the approaches outlined above, the central group of people organising ABCD should involve local residents as much as possible, they should be centrally involved in the storytelling at community level. They should be connected, given communication channels and brought together to form a collective, creating the networks of relationships required to investigate the community's greatest assets (Mathie and Cunningham 2003). Thus, focus groups should be comprised of all individuals who are equipped to join a discussion about a specific topic and be different groups for different topics/issues (Berkowitz and Rabinowitz 2007). In contrast, a need-based approach would seek to identify problems in the community from outside and use a form of professional treatment or intervention to cure the problem (Shedpherd, Boardman & Slade 2008). ABCD practitioners seek to work *with*, rather than *on*, communities, through establishing the strengths and assets within a community and putting those to work to benefit the community, enabling them to develop their own goals and aspirations.

From the above exposition of ABCD approaches, it would seem appropriate for the research upon which this thesis is based to adopt the use of focus groups for the assessment of poverty in developing countries, including Vietnam, and draw out the overall picture on the possibilities of poverty reduction with the aid of the ABCD process, as shown in Figure 2.1 below..



**Figure 2.1: The ABCD process circle**

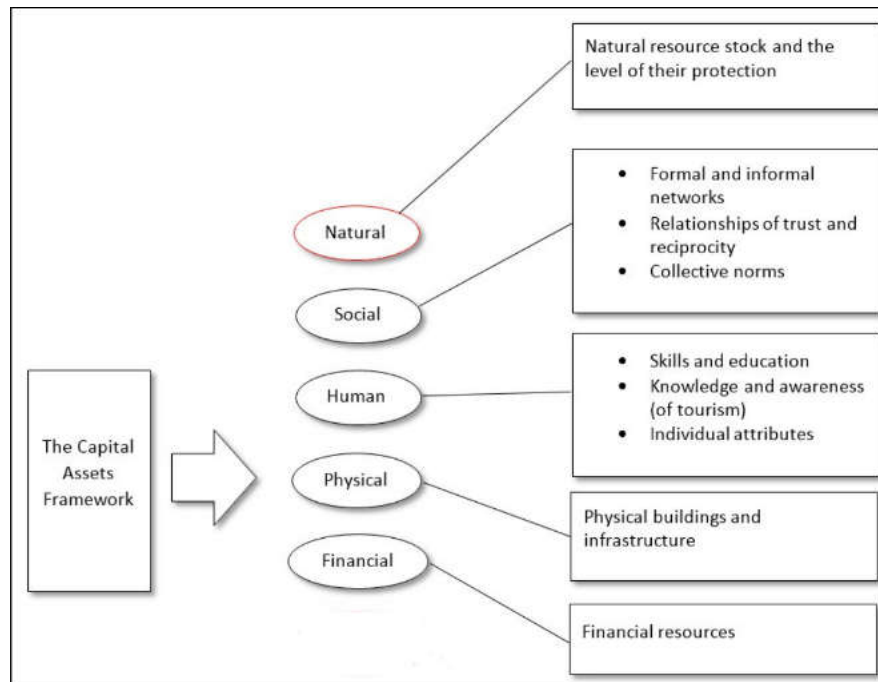
### ***2.5.2 Community assets for ABCD***

The identification and development of individual and community assets is central to the premise of ABCD, which is founded on the belief that community development should begin from a position of discovering and harnessing strengths and possibilities, rather than meeting deficiencies and needs (Mathie and Cunningham 2003; Symons 2005). Assets operate at the level of the individual, family, community and population, promoting factors that buffer against life's stressors (Morgan and Ziglio 2007). Assets which combat poverty can be categorised as both internal and external: internal assets include commitment to learning and positive values, social skills, positive identity and self-control; external assets refer to support, safety, respect, boundaries, expectations and constructive use of time. However, defining what actually constitutes an asset is complex and highly contestable (Jewell 2016). Nels (2015) defines assets as building blocks of livelihoods which can be either tangible or intangible. If tangible assets refer to such

resources as lands or soil, the intangible assets refer to human capacity or that which is intangible enabling access to the tangible assets. According to McKnight and Kretzmann (1993:163), assets are considered the ‘the skills, gifts and capabilities of individual, associations and institutions within a community’. Thus, under ABCD, assets are defined in a very broad term, moving beyond the economic notions of assets as the capital that can be used to generate economic wealth. ABCD links assets with factors for creating and maximising opportunities for individuals and communities to thrive. Bebbington (1999) argues that assets are vital for people to have the ability to think, act and are thus a core component for human development.

Drawing upon Mathie and Cunningham (2003), associations of community members play the key role in ABCD, being utilized to identify the assets existing in the community, thereby connecting individuals to each other so that power and effectiveness can be increased. The concepts of assets in ABCD are continually and flexibly changing within both literature and practice (Green and Haines 2012) and there are consequently more and more frameworks for revealing and developing assets within communities. More specifically, there are currently five kinds of assets presented by the academic literature and these are outlined in Figure 2.2 below and within the passages that follow.





**Figure 2.2: The Capital Assets Framework**

### **Natural capital**

The concept of ‘natural capital’ refers to ecological assets, to which access can both be constrained (for example by a collective administration) or free to all people. These assets include, for example, air, water, woods and biodiversity.

### **Social capital**

Social capital refers to shared norms, values and knowledge that exist inside and between family units, more distant families and groups within a community, that individuals can activate to access, for instance, advances, childcare, settlement and data about business and openings.

### **Financial capital**

There are two main types of financial capital. One is accessible stocks including prior money, stored or fluid resources which are generally autonomous. The other is general inflows of cash, for example, benefits, wages, or different exchanges from

outsiders, for example, governments or magnanimous associations (Kollmair and St. Gamper 2002).

### **Physical capital**

Physical capital for the most part refers to housing and other merchandise, largely in urban settings. Housing is ordinarily one of the foremost resources for the urban poor as it often acts as a form of security or guarantee and is also used for profitable purposes, for example through leasing rooms or utilising space as a workshop (Moser 1998). Another critical physical resource for community gatherings is infrastructure, for example, reasonable transport, satisfactory water supply and sanitation. Moreover these products can also act as a stockpile of significant worth and be pawned or sold to manage sudden emergency (Chambers 1997).

### **Human capital**

Human capital refers to ‘the aptitudes, information, capacity to work and great wellbeing that together empower individuals to seek after various job procedures and accomplish their occupation goals’ (DFID 1999: 22). Other than being a benefit in itself, human capital unequivocally provides individuals and groups with other advantages.

#### ***2.5.3. Application of ABCD***

It is important to consider the comparative theorisation and application of ABCD. Can ABCD-based projects be structured and operate in the same manner in various cultural contexts ? Is ABCD philosophically and theoretically 'mature' enough to allow parallel forms of interpretation and application of the model, and if they are markedly different, should such initiatives be labelled as ABCD-based ? Many case studies from around the world have shown how ABCD has been implemented effectively and favourably in a variety of social, cultural and financial contexts, in both the global north and the global south (Burke et al. 2009: 10). These following

examples will demonstrate how ABCD has been implemented, while also illustrating the role of assets in the community development process.

In East Asia, ABCD has been implemented in several countries, including China and Taiwan. Hipwell (2009) outlines the benefits of ABCD for development in Taiwan via three case studies of the Tsou, Tayal and Taroko territories, and particularly through the enhancement of political enforcement, community capacity and social/physical assets. One of the most significant examples offered within this is the case of Tanayiky Natural Ecology Park. In the late 1970s, the first time the paved roads were built in Tsou territory around Saviki brought a large number of Han Chinese into the region who were eager to take advantage of the economic and leisure opportunities, which had previously been prevented by government restrictions. Following this, there was a significant increase in the number of fishers from other communities. When the local Tsou fishers also joined, local streams were depleted of fish. In order to try and revitalize the environment for marine life, the Tanayiku Development Committee was formed in 1985 by the Saviki Tsou community to enable collective stewardship of Tanayiku Creek. Their efforts have achieved remarkable success in ecological restoration. In only a few years, the population of Kooye Minnow grew considerably, thereby creating a high increase in the number of fishes in Tanayyiku Creek. In an acknowledgement of this success, an eco-pack was built around the lower reaches of the stream. Since its accomplishment in 1995, there have been around 450,000 visitors arriving in the region annually, which has significantly contribute to the intensive development of the local economy, as well as raising local living standards. By adopting ABCD and by establishing and developing existing eco-cultural assets, the Saviki and Tsou were able to mobilize social capital and community assets effectively. The development of the Tanayiku Natural Eco Park of Saviki Tsou is an impressive example of the fruitful success that can be achieved through the implementation of ABCD.

ABCD has also been applied in some African countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia. Smeaton and Russell (2009) illustrate the implementation of ABCD in Kenya through the story of local people in five main areas, namely Turkana South, Pokot Central, East Pokot, Samburu North and Samburu East. ABCD approaches were developed in these locations in collaboration with five organisations - VSF-Belgium, VSF-Germany, ACTED, Oxfam and Practical Action. ABCD process of asset mapping and community organization were conducted, enabling the connection and mobilization of community resources. According to Smeaton and Russell (2009), the effectiveness of this community development process has seen a marked decline in foreign aid to these regions, which they were previously highly dependent upon.

Peters et al (2009) and Mathie and Peters (2014) report upon seven pilot sites, where ABCD has been attempted, within 21 community groups involving over 11,000 participants from different regions of Ethiopia. Extreme rural poverty and limited livelihood diversification has triggered a significant increase in food aid and Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Ethiopia since the 1980s. The country is the currently the largest recipient country of food aid in the world and one of the largest recipient countries of ODA. The aim of Peters et al (2009) was to test the potential of ABCD's community-level approach, that focuses on assets, strengths, and opportunities within the community, for stimulating community development from within. Ilu Aga was one of these seven pilot sites which is populated by 7,000 people located in South Central Ethiopia and is 40 km west of the country's capital. Like many communities in Ethiopia, Ilu Aga is a poor community based upon traditional ways of life. A team of 40 residents adopted a series of ABCD exercises which had been supplied by a local NGO named Hundee. From 2003 to 2008, the project of ABCD in Ilu Aga did accomplish some key milestones, namely:

- (1) the replacement of a low-quality water supply with a new irrigation

- system;
- (2) the restoration of a traditional cultivation practice to enhance the growth of vegetables;
- (3) the implementation of a modern operation to cut down the expense of chemical fertilizers;
- (4) tree and terrace planting to avert soil erosion;
- (5) enhancement of livestock fattening to increase the income of households.

Many of the above were inter-connected. Thus, the vegetable project was formed in 2008 to utilize existing, traditional knowledge and methods of irrigation to improve the water supply in the local area. This then enabled local farmers to expand their activities, boosting potato yields, planting a wider range of vegetables and ultimately improving the sales of vegetables through a better but traditional water supply system with foot pumps. Following this, those involved in the ABCD implementation group decided to build storage sheds in order to keep potatoes fresh for longer periods of time. It did not take a long time to see the results: as early as the second year of the ABCD group's existence, profits from the sale of vegetables more than tripled. The success of this ABCD action research project shows what can be achieved through a focus upon existing resources in the community, and their organization for the common good.

From the above, we can see that ABCD has been an extremely advantageous approach to community development and poverty reduction in many different contexts and countries around the world. However, this approach to community development is not without its pitfalls and criticisms and we turn to these in the following section.

#### ***2.5.4 Criticisms of ABCD***

Although ABCD has been widely used as a development initiative and the above examples show the benefits that can accrue from implementing ABCD for poverty reduction and community development, it is clear that nothing is ever a perfect approach.

As previously mentioned, ABCD is often seen as an alternative to needs-based approaches wherein a small concentration of community leaders prioritize residents' needs in order to protect funding from external agencies or organizations, while simultaneously discouraging communities as a whole to be pro-active within their own development and thus promoting, even unwittingly, feelings of powerlessness. However, when ABCD is actually applied, it often does not adequately address how the community can avoid its dependency on external resources in the community development process, nor the role of external agencies, organizations and institutions (Keeble and Meisel 2006; Mathie and Cunningham 2003). In addition, Mathie and Cunningham (2003) also point out that if an external organization tries to implement ABCD, it will be in danger of further promoting the dependency of a community. In such scenarios, outside agencies are supposed to only initiate and support the asset-based process, but in fact often don't know when to step back. Furthermore, Khadka (2012) argues that ABCD should not completely ignore the needs-based and problem solving approach to local development, to which many external organizations, funding regimes and development initiatives adhere. This could starve communities in need of vital financial resources. A balanced approach is required.

Although one of the founding principles of ABCD is a focus upon assets, resources, knowledge and relationships across entire communities, the approach can sometimes ignore the power dynamics and power relationships within a community (Goatting and Green 2010: 8). While the asset based development approach emphasizes the common values and interests that can be used as a basis for

mobilizing all residents to solve the critical issues that their community are facing, it can lead to community division as practitioners and organizers are required to initiate the process and can be seen as setting the agenda and controlling decisions and activities. Mathie and Cunningham (2003) also argue that the ABCD approach often does not deal with the issues of gendered power relationships and inequalities within communities, as well as the social exclusion from communities often experienced by minority groups, the lowest social classes and those in rural areas. These groups are often excluded from any development process and project (including ABCD) (Goatting and Green 2010). All of these issues are obviously highly pertinent to the focus and subject of this thesis.

Overall, it is often less difficult to mobilize communities around needs and problems than it might be around assets (Goatting and Green 2010: 8). Needs and problems are often easier phenomena to bring residents together on, but then that effort may be more difficult to sustain. In addition, people often want to jump to solutions before fully understanding the nature of the problem or issue. As Green (2010) argues, in the long term, in order to improve the quality of their life, mobilizing communities to understand the resources available for development inside the local community may be a more effective and sustainable strategy to develop their community.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

To summarise, following a review of varying theoretical approaches to community development and poverty reduction, this chapter has then defined and outlined the key concept and approach of ABCD, which is central to the thesis and has been shaped by the broader perspectives reviewed. This chapter has also examined some of the main ways and contexts in which this approach to community development has been implemented in reality. This asset based community development approach emphasizes mapping, leveraging and mobilizing existing

local resources, identifying individual experiences, skills, and interests (Goatting and Green 2010). Despite the potential limitations discussed above, the ABCD approach builds on the assets and strength of their community to bring progressive change in communities. This approach can see the community as a source of positive energy and of self-sufficiency that can ensure inclusiveness and social justice.

This chapter has also highlighted the key difference between ABCD and other forms of community development and attempts to achieve poverty reduction, specifically the seeking out of strengths and resources within the community and a principle that development can come from within the community rather than from outside ‘experts’. Across the world, participatory approaches to community development, such as ABCD, have moved from locally successful projects into large scale programmes promoted by regional and national governments and international agencies such as the World Bank (O’Leary 2006: 4). However, building upon the review of existing literature and research conducted in this chapter, and particularly the potential pitfalls and criticisms of ABCD highlighted in the previous section, it is clearly crucial that ABCD is implemented in a way that is sensitive to the particular context and power dynamics within which it is applied.



# **CHAPTER 3**

## **THE RESEARCH CONTEXT – POVERTY REDUCTION PROCESSES IN VIETNAM AND ITS EFFECT ON THE SON LA PROVINCE**

### **3.1. Introduction**

Vietnam is currently amongst the best nations in the world in terms of economic development and destitution diminishment in the course of recent decades (Tung 2015). The poverty rate strongly tumbled from 58 per cent in 1993 to 11.8 per cent in 2011 (Worldbank 2013b) and then to less than 10 per cent in 2013 (Worldbank 2013b: 14). Nevertheless, Vietnam is now confronting difficulties in maintaining the accomplished outcomes. Actually, the threat of falling back to destitution is high and destitution still persists. Poverty in Vietnam is predominantly a rural issue, with 90 per cent of the poor individuals live in the rural areas. The region where density of the poor is the highest are mountainous and remote areas in the Central Highland and Northwest parts of the nation, which are widely populated by ethnic minorities (Tuan 2008:7). Amongst the poorest 10 per cent of the Vietnamese population, ethnic minorities constitute 65 per cent (Tung 2015; Worldbank, 2013b). Ethnic minorities make up over a half of the poor in Vietnam.

Combating poverty in ethnic minorities is one of the most ‘specific and persistent challenges of Vietnam’ currently, with ethnic minority destitution being ‘a specific and constant test for Vietnam’ (Worldbank 2013b: 122). In spite of the fact that families living in the 53 ethnic minority groups of Vietnam have experienced an ascent in expectations of life since 1998, this rise in living standards has not been as dramatic as for the ethnic majority Kinh group. The reported gap in poverty levels between ethnic minorities and the Kinh has expanded quickly at the same time as Vietnam's period of impressive overall economic development and poverty

reduction. The depth and scale of poverty amongst the ethnic minorities of Vietnam poses a huge challenge to Vietnam in the process of attaining the objectives of reducing poverty in line with the Millennium Development Goals and the Socio-Economic Development Plan (Thang 2013: 142).

One of the main reasons for the relative lack of progress in ethnic minority poverty reduction is the general approach to the poverty reduction process. To more substantially open doors for poor family units to benefit from economic development, the Vietnamese legislature has presented numerous programmes for poverty reduction that focus on poor families of particular groups and districts, and there are a substantial number of studies on effect assessment of poverty reduction programmes in Vietnam. However, there is no comprehensive focus or research upon ethnic minority communities in the Northern Mountain Provinces, such as Son La. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to review the overall nature and impact of the poverty reduction process in Vietnam, but particularly that in Son La province, as well as to examine the links between poverty and ethnicity, considering recent government policies to reduce the poverty rate for ethnic minorities in Vietnam in general and Son La province in particular. Son La is the chosen site for this research project because of its belonging to one of the poorest regions of Vietnam with the highest density of ethnic minorities. More than 83 per cent of the total population of the province are ethnic minorities.

### **3.2. Interpretation of poverty**

The United Nations (2009) indicates that since 1990, poverty reduction has become one of the major objectives of international and national development policies. However, defining poverty thoroughly is not straightforward, with the definition and measurement of poverty evolving and changing over time (Hessin 2014). Up to

date, there has been no general agreement on what exactly poverty is. Poverty is a social term, its definition varying depending upon who formulates the concept. Most governments and social service agencies have their own definitions of poverty, including how it can be measured and who will be considered (Dziedzic 2007). Nevertheless, besides several definitions of poverty revealed by academic scholars, there still maintains the reality that living poor is difficult to imagine. Theoretically, poverty can be understood to represent physical weakness, caused by negative health status, disability, sickness or malnutrition. It can also bring about hopelessness and powerlessness for those who have to suffer from it (Chambers 1988). In addition, poverty is the main cause of psychological pressure or depression existing inside the mind of human individuals.

Many governments, organizations and other agencies often categorize poverty as both absolute and relative (Dziedzic 2007, Worldbank 2013b). Absolute poverty is defined as a status where critical security is missing, where there is lack of important factors which are considered to enable individuals to maintain a basic human life, such as food, clothing and shelter. Watkins (1995) points out that relative poverty refers to the economic status of members in specific groups relative to others. Poverty does not stem from the lack of just one element, but is an experience produced by many interlocking factors.

In Vietnam, the government, since the early days of national independence (1945), have identified poverty, alongside illiteracy and the foreign invader, as an ‘enemy’ of Vietnam. The interpretation of, and the responses to, poverty in Vietnam from the government have changed over time. Formally, Vietnam endorses the general interpretation of poverty which was stated at the Asia-Pacific conference on poverty reduction held by ESCAP in Bangkok, Thailand in September 1993:

Poverty is a situation in which a proportion of the population does not

enjoy the satisfaction of basic human needs that have been recognized by the society depending on the level of economic and social development and local customs and practices.

More recently, Vietnam has spent time figuring out the definition as well as the measurement of poverty in multi-dimensional terms (Roelen 2014). There are no official documents of the government confirming that it has had a multi-dimensional poverty (MDP) approach, however, most of provincial officials state that current policies and programmes do have a MDP approach because it covers all cultural, physical and spiritual aspects of life. However, in government decision 1614/QĐ-TTg, dated 15 September 2015 the Prime Minister announced a scheme ‘converting poverty approaches from single-dimensional measurement based on incomes to multidimensional, applied in stage 2016-2020’, and this was agreed. This means that although the government still adopts the monetary approach, the multi-dimensional approaches have been applied since 2016 and resolving ‘basic needs’ remains the overriding priority in practice (Tung 2015).

Throughout many national Congresses of the Communist Party of Vietnam, especially during the renewal process, hunger eradication and poverty reduction continued to be confirmed as a major policy, long-term objective, and specific task of the country’s socio-economic development (Ninh 2014).

### **3.3. Vietnam context**

#### ***3.3.1 General picture of ethnic minorities in Vietnam***

Vietnam is a tropical country of Southeast Asia bordered by China to the North, Lao PDR to the Northeast, and Cambodia to the Southwest. It contains a large number of ethnic minority groups. According to the General Census of population and housing in 2009, the population of Vietnam is approximately 86 million (VGSO 2010). According

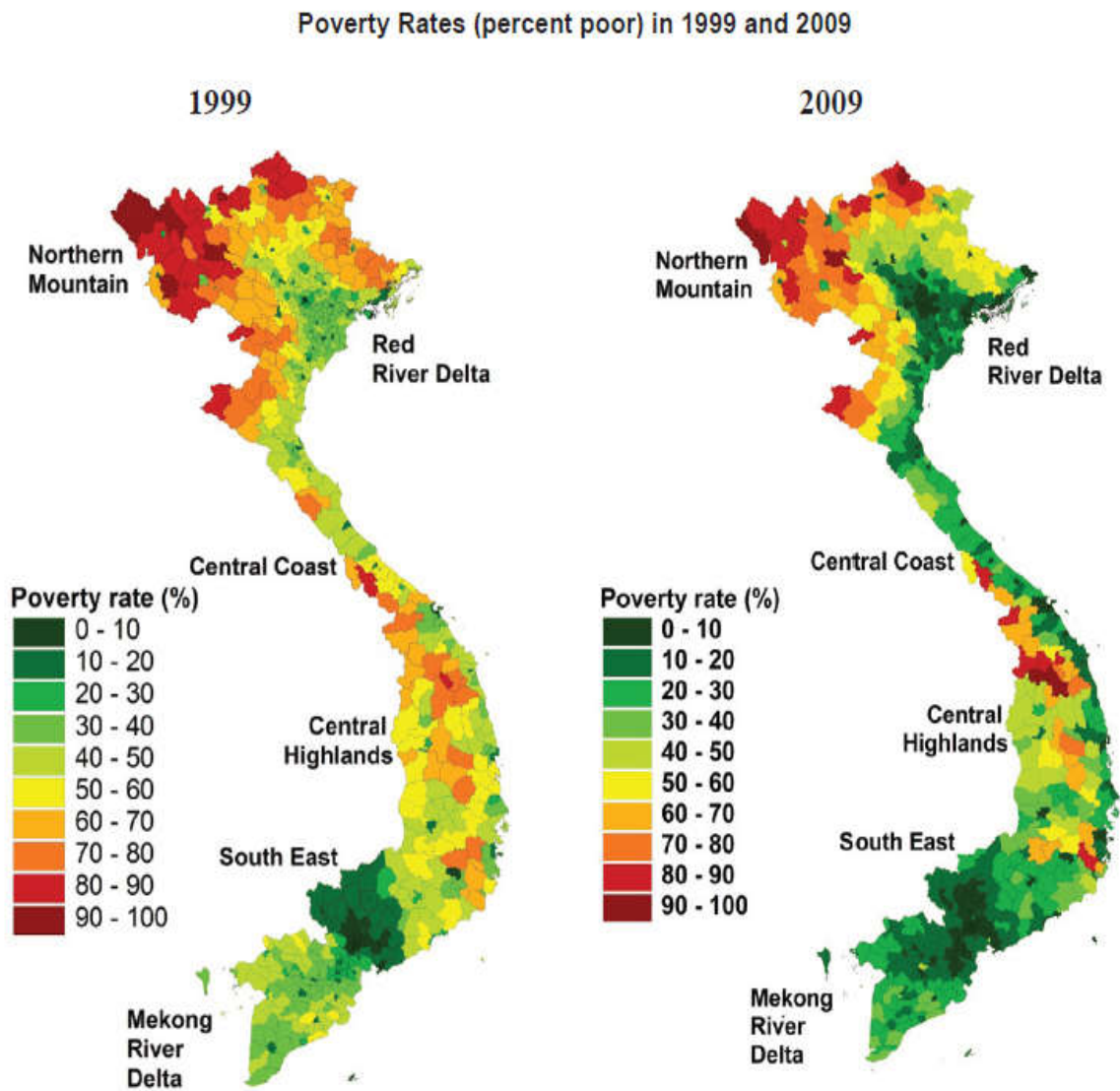
to Pham Thi Hai Chuyen - The Minister of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (2016), poverty reduction and hunger annihilation have always been among the key missions of the Vietnamese government in all circumstances. This issue has engaged the whole political system - to comprehensively support poverty reduction, particularly in the poorest areas, the mountainous and ethnic minorities regions.

In general, ethnic minorities in Vietnam can be understood as all people who have Vietnamese nationality living in Vietnam without sharing Kinh or 'Vietnamese' characteristics such as language, culture, and identity. According to ADB (2008), ethnic minorities are often regarded as homogenous groups despite the fact that they tend to be very diverse with respect to language, lifestyles, agricultural practices, kinship system and beliefs. In Vietnam, such groups often depend on incomes from agriculture and experience exceptionally restricted access to education, modern infrastructure, health care and non-farm opportunities.

Most of the Vietnamese ethnic minority groups are located in the mountainous and remote areas, which accounts for the most parts of the whole country. In fact, the density of ethnic minorities in Vietnam is quite high: inhabiting midland, coastal and mountain areas. Nevertheless, the areas, which contain most of the ethnic minority populations are the Northeast, and the mountainous areas in the North Central part, the Central Highlands and the South Central part - the Thai, Tay, Nung, H'mong (Meo) and Dao. There are quite large groups with the number of inhabitants ranging from 500,000 to 1.2 million people. There also exist some groups populated with less than 300,000 inhabitants, however, the figure sometimes stops at a few hundred. Each group owns a specific language created from their own voice, but as Vietnamese ethnic groups live closely with each other and engage in every day community relationships, one ethnic group may know some other's languages, customs and traditions.

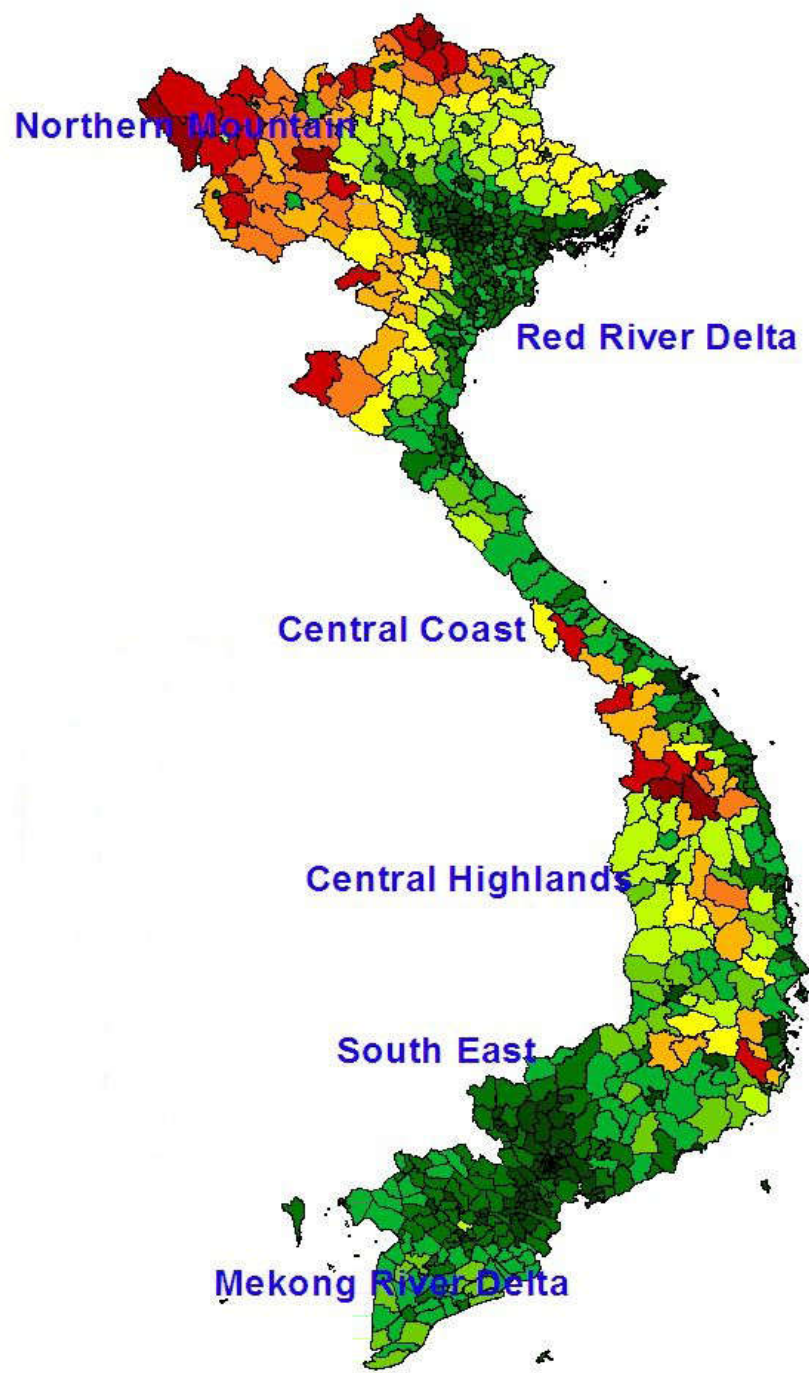
The poverty rate variation among the provinces in the Northern mountains has varied dramatically. The provinces in the Northwest have a higher poverty rate than

those in the Northeast region. There also exists a large difference in the poverty rate between the Kinh/Hoa majority group and the ethnic minorities within each province. This is illustrated by the poverty map below, which was informed by the 2010 VHLSS and 2009 Housing and Population Census:

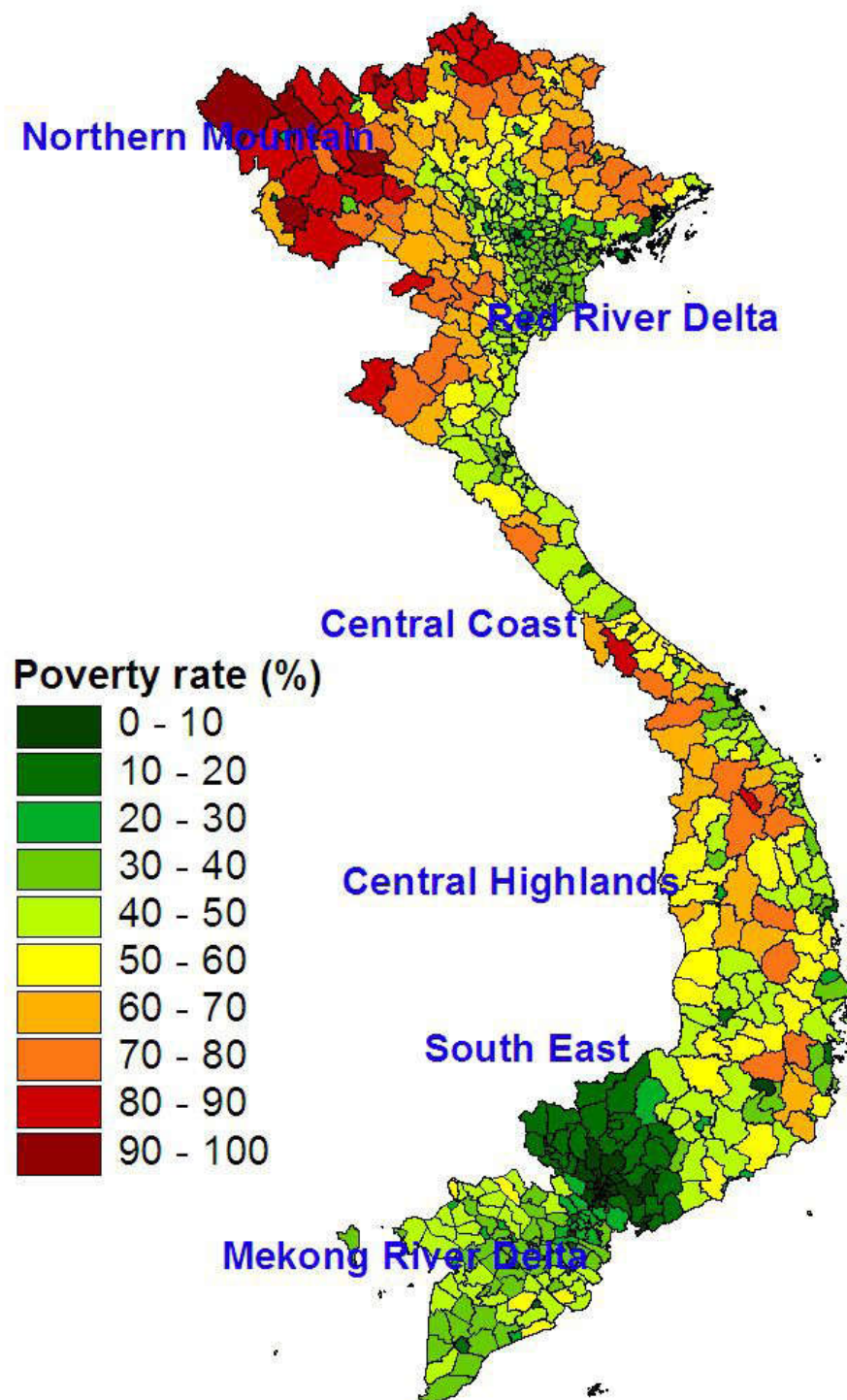


**Figure 3.1: Poverty rate in different provinces in Vietnam in 1999 and 1999.**

**Source: World Bank, 2013**



**Figure 3.2: Poverty rate estimation in different provinces in Vietnam 2013.**  
**Source: World Bank, 2013**



**Figure 3.3: Poverty rate estimation in different provinces in Vietnam 2013.**

**Source: World Bank, 2013**



### ***3.3.2 Overview of poverty in ethnic minorities***

#### ***3.3.2.1 Social transfer and public services***

There are several reasons explaining why ethnic minorities account for 15 per cent of the Vietnamese population and yet 70 per cent of the poorest group. One of these reasons is lack of access to public service or social transfer (Demombynes 2013). Public services includes a wide range of provisions necessary to meet basic human needs, such as main electricity, drinking water and the preferential loan.

Safe drinking water has been provided to most lands in rural areas in Vietnam since 1998, but until 2006 just a small part of the country (and only two-fifths of the northern upland) could access this clean drinking water source. Access to main electricity has been developed remarkably since 1998 in Vietnam and by 2006 more than 90 per cent of Vietnamese rural areas could attain electricity. However, the ethnic minorities have even been excluded from this provision, with their coverage of electricity accounting for only 75 per cent. It is also widely held that the Vietnamese government have restricted their infrastructure programmes in most remote and mountainous areas, making access to loans difficult there and certainly not as accessible as they are for Kinh and Hoa groups.

#### ***3.3.2.2 Ethnic minority education system***

Another major reason often cited for ethnic minority poverty in Vietnam is limited access to high quality education. Evidence from VHLSS06 and VLSS98 can be utilized to clarify the situation of enrolments for, and dropouts from, school of ethnic minority students.

Disadvantages in education for ethnic minority children and young people in Vietnam increases with the age of the young person, which, in turn, hinders them in the labour market. Specifically, according to VHLSS06, the percentage of children in the mountainous and remote areas enrolling for primary school

increased by only 2 per cent between 1998 and 2006. This figure was 30 per cent within other regions of Vietnam. These disparities become wider when we look at enrolments for secondary school, with more than 60 per cent of Hoa and Kinh young people attending upper secondary school but only 10 per cent of young people from ethnic minorities attending.

An analysis of educational dropouts rates is another way in which ethnicity-based disadvantages in education can be illustrated. Data from VLSS98 shows that most dropouts happen during the time students transit from primary school to secondary school. It is reported that the grades observing the highest percentage of dropouts are grades two and three in the Northern ethnic minorities. One of the reasons for this is because in such rural and mountainous areas, children at these ages have to move from class to class making them unable to afford the distance to study. In the central ethnic minorities, the dropout percentage is highest from grade six to grade seven, and is more pronounced for girls. In short, the educational enrolment rate for ethnic minorities in Vietnam is lower than the rest of the population, while the educational dropout rate is higher. This can be seen as a major contributing factor to the enduring poverty experienced by ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

#### *3.3.2.3 Ethnic minority health care*

Health care is another major factor effecting the poverty status of ethnic minorities in Vietnam and an evaluation of the health condition of children can be revealed in accordance with major nutrition indicators: height-for-age and weight-for-height. Specifically, children with a height-for-age higher than two and three deviations are considered stunted. Stunting is a consequence of long-term malnutrition (GSO 2006). Children with the weight-for-height higher than two and three deviations are considered wasted children. Wasting is a result of deficiency in nutrition provision. There have been attempts within Vietnam to reduce the rate of both stunted and wasted children, especially in ethnic minorities. However, the stunting rate of

nutrition, and ethnic minority children suffer the worst in this respect (Haughton and Huaghton 1997).

#### *3.3.2.4 Incomes, employment and capital mobility*

Employment and income are two obvious factors shaping living standards and poverty rates/experiences. According to the Vietnamese Labour Force Survey of 2007, ethnic minorities workers are 2.5 times less likely to be in paid employment than the Kinh people and ten times more likely to work in the informal sector with no wage regulation.

One of the reasons for this is that most of non-Kinh people are less mobile than the Kinh and Hoa. In other words, there exist several obstacles of mobility for ethnic minorities such as the economic, social and geographic status. It was stated out by GSO 2007 that the portion of in-migration plays the most vital role in southern part, while the out-migration is considered to be the lowest level in the northwest part. Regarding to the clarification in VHLS06, ethnic groups in rural areas have derived a smaller portion of their income than those of other parts.

In short, income and employment as well as the mobility in ethnic minorities are still of low level. Though the Vietnamese government has carried out many policies, the cooperation between authorities and individuals to improve this situation is still needed

### **3.4. Overview of the poverty reduction process in Vietnam**

#### *3.4.1 General picture of poverty reduction*

Vietnam is currently living through an economic and industrial transformation as it moves towards a market-oriented economy. Economic growth has been dramatic and overall life expectancy has increased. Both poverty reduction and economic growth have been exceptional over the last two decades. The GDP annual growth rate of Vietnam over the past decade has been, on average, 6.94 percent (Vietnam

report 2013). While this economic development has enhanced prosperity and life chances across the country of practically, the mission of huge poverty reduction is yet to be fulfilled. It has to be noted that in parallel with economic growth, the Vietnamese government has attempted policy interventions to reduce poverty and has had some success. Thus, as indicated by the 2010 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey (VHLSS), the number of individuals beneath the poverty line dropped significantly from 62 per cent in 1992 to 58 per cent in 1993 and to 37 per cent in 1998, trailed by the diminishing to 18.1, 15.5 and 13.4 percent (VTV1, 2016) in 2004, 2006 and 2008 separately (Nhan, 2015). Following the government's new poverty lines for the period 2011-2015, the national poverty rate was 14.2 per cent in 2010 and just 11.8 percent in 2011 (VMOLISA 2013; Worldbank 2013b). From 1993 to 2006, neediness in Vietnam diminished at a rate rate of 3.2 per cent in each year (Hall and Patrinos 2012).

Despite the above reported progress, not all social groups have shared equally in Vietnamese poverty reduction. Recent research carried out by Vietnam Academy of Social sciences (2011) pointed out that disparities according to both geography and ethnicity still exist. In the Red River Delta and the South East regions of the country, the poverty rates were only single-digit with 3.5 % and 8.1 % in 2008, a dramatic decrease from 40 % and 61.4 % respectively in 1993. The North West region, which is characterized by isolation from the national market and a high ethnic minority population, has seen the slowest poverty reduction progress. The poverty rates was 45.7 per cent in 2008, decreasing from 81 per cent in 1993. In the Northern Mountains, the poverty rate remained 39.4 per cent in 2010 (Worldbank 2013b) and 33 per cent in 2011 (GWP 2012), and the ethnic minority poverty rate reaches 67.3 per cent when the the new national poverty line is applied (Viet Cuong 2012). The Northern Mountain ethnic minorities have a share of the population of 7 per cent and they represent 25.4 per cent of the poor of the nation.

Poverty reduction for ethnic minorities has been one of the highest concerns of the

Vietnamese government and various organizations. A survey conducted by a team of Indochina Research and Consulting (IRC) in December 2012 (IRC 2012) revealed that the poverty rate amongst Vietnam's ethnic minority groups decreased strongly by 8% in the previous 5 years. However, this report also pointed out that ethnic minorities haven't had the same poverty reduction rate as the majority of the population. Despite the fact that the poverty reduction has been implemented in both minority and majority groups, poverty amongst ethnic minorities is still significantly more intensive than in other groups, validated by all recent Vietnam General Statistics Office surveys. Up to 50 per cent of the ethnic minority population live under the poverty line, compared to 9 per cent in the majority population. Furthermore, the proportion of ethnic minorities amongst poor households in Vietnam has increased significantly since the 1990s. In 1990, 18 per cent of the poor came from minority households, it was 29 per cent in 1998, 39 per cent in 2004, 47 per cent in 2006 and 56 per cent in 2008. While the rate dropped sharply to 31 per cent in 2010, this is still 2.5 times the national average. Applying the new national poverty line (500.000 VND or £14.8/person/month), the rate was 53.5 per cent in 2012 (Worldbank 2013b). If the living standards of ethnic minorities cannot be rapidly and significantly improved, poverty will continue to be primary threat to the well-being, health and life chances of ethnic minorities in Vietnam (Hung. et al. 2011).

### ***3.4.2 Poverty measurement***

In Vietnam, the government is using two different approaches to measure poverty and monitor poverty reduction progress simultaneously. Each approach is monitored by a specific agency with different objectives while both approaches make use of the poverty lines determined by the government. The most recent measurements use different indicators. Previous approaches have measured the status of poverty by using an expenditure poverty line, which is defined by the GSO together with the World Bank, while the new approach is based on an income poverty line, which is widely used by authorities in Vietnam (Tung 2015). As part of a national review of poor households that is used as a basis for development in the policies of social protection

suitable with the price fluctuations and the living standards observed, the government of Vietnam will adopt this new income line to evaluate poverty every five years. A full list of poor households, including those who have the ability to overcome the poverty and those that are at risk of falling into poverty, is identified and rechecked every year in order to estimate the poverty rate of each province and the national level (MOLISA 2015 ). However, the problem is that this process is not regularly updated, only every five years. The goal of the GSO method is also to evaluate the rate of poverty at both national and provincial level. To attain this goal, GSO has conducted the Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey (VLSS) every two years, through accessing population samples (Tung, 2015). Thua, the poverty rate indicated by MOLISA is more slowly updated than the GSO method. Consequently, the poverty rate estimated through the GSO is always higher than that done by MOLISA method.

Poverty appraisal in Vietnam formally relies on the supreme poverty line recognized by the cost of fundamental demand, which refers to the food basket with an acceptable minimum cost of basic demand. This is a food basket which contains acceptable minimum calorie value (around 2100 Kcal) and its composition, which links the consumption of poor families with the expense of nourishment (UNDP 2010). This definition of poverty was first drawn from joint work between the World Bank and GSO, wherein the first threshold of poverty was applied in the VHLSS in 1993 (Thắng et al. 2011). The poverty threshold is redefined every five years in the plan of socio-economic development. In this research, all the statistical data on poverty, which was collected from official reports and statistics of the local government, is calculated based on per capita income and income poverty threshold, as defined by the government of Vietnam during the period from 2011 to 2015 (Dung, 2011). The official poverty line is up to 400,000 VND per person per month (£13) in rural areas and up to 500,000 VND (£16) per person per month in urban areas<sup>1</sup>. The income poverty threshold for the period 2011-2015 is double that for the previous period in the rural areas.

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<sup>1</sup> According to decision 09/2011/QĐ-TTg dated 30<sup>th</sup>, January, 2011 of Prime Minister of Vietnam, since 1<sup>st</sup>, January, 2011 the new national poverty line was officially effective.

### ***3.4.3 Poverty reduction programmes and policies***

To bridge the growing gap between the country's mountainous region and the rest of the country and to reduce poverty, the Government of Vietnam has carried out preferential policies on socio-economic development, poverty reduction programmes and policies for poor household groups and regions, especially targeting ethnic minority groups in order to improve all aspects of their living conditions.

Prior to 1998, there were around 21 national projects targeting ethnic minority and mountainous areas which were implemented by the government. Following this, a more logical and practical project was implemented (Nguyen and Baulch 2007). A government workshop on 3 December 2010 titled '*Solutions to Poverty reduction and Stabilization of Ethnic and Mountainous areas in the period 2011-2015*' showed that, to this point, more than 50 policies and 200 political documents had been produced in relation to poverty reduction for ethnic minority communities. Giang Pheo Su (VCFEMA 2010), Minister and Chairman of the Vietnam Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs stated at the time that: '*Currently, on average, between 20 and 30 poverty reduction policies are being carried out in each commune in mountainous and ethnic minority areas*'. Program 143 (P143), Programme 135 (P135) and Program 30a (P30a), The Hunger and Poverty Eradication Program, P132 and P134 (concentrating on Central Highlands to improve housing conditions as well as to increase access to land), and health insurance for the poor areas, were the most important programmes. P143 emerged from program 133 and 120 in 2001, and its first phase was ended in 2005. The second phase lasted from 2006 to 2010. P143 was known as the employment creation program - poverty reduction and hunger eradication. The aims of P143 were to:

- (1) eradicate chronic hunger as well as to decrease the poverty rate to less than 10%;
- (2) guarantee a strong investment in basic infrastructure such as schools,

hospitals, electricity, and water source;

- (3) decrease the rate of unemployment in urban areas to under 6% and enhance the percentage of working hours to 80% in 2005, along with designing the sub-components specific for ethnic minorities, though the program is nationally targeted.

P135 is a national poverty diminishment programme that began in 1998 and lasted for seven years. Phrase 2 was extended to 2010 and phrase 3 lasted until 2015. This is the biggest and most critical poverty diminishment programme focusing on remote areas and ethnic minorities and which attempts to confront huge obstacles (Nguyen and Baulch 2007: 4). This programme chose these remote and ethnic minority communities basing upon their poverty status, as well as the poor rate and/or absence of key infrastructure for agriculture (Tung et al. 2013: 2-3). Elledge and Bloom (2001) noted long ago that 22 ethnic minority groups have benefitted from this programme. Almost 5.5 million ethnic minorities, from a total population of 10 million individuals, were touched by the first phrase (Dinh 2006). The programme emphasises the importance of generational access to basic infrastructure, training indigenous officials, enhancing the educational system and raising individuals' mindfulness and physical and spiritual life. Communities and collectives targeted by the programme have a high rate of household poverty, regularly higher than the average level for the nation. In the communes under P135, such difficulties as constrained access to social media, harsh weather conditions, poor access to electricity or lack of access to a local market did put great strain on the ethnic minorities, especially their poverty status. According to declaration 07/2006/QD-TTg (2006) from a Minister of the Vietnam government, the primary aims of P135 - Phase 2 are:

- (1) to eliminate hunger and poverty thoroughly in the targeted areas, to less than 30%;
- (2) to ensure more than 70% of households living in the targeted areas attain



an income per capita higher than 104 euro (3.5 million VND). Therefore, it is imperative to enhance the living standards of ethnic minorities;

(3) to ensure that the agricultural productivity of the main crops are increased and to promote market-oriented agricultural development;

(4) to ensure that net primary school and net secondary school enrolment rates are improved to 95 per cent and 75 per cent respectively.

To attain the above goals, the Vietnamese government designed four major components to support P135:

(1) enhance agricultural productivity by providing ethnic minority people with more practical training and skill training;

(2) aid in developing basic infrastructure and ensure more opportunities access to schools, hospitals, irrigation, roads and electricity;

(3) improve public services and social-cultural life;

(4) enhance local officials' knowledge of investment and operations management and strengthening their administrative and professional capacity.

In P135's first phase, 2410 of the country's poorest communes were covered, out of which 1938 of were mountainous (Tran 2006).

P30a is another national programme started in 2008, following the Vietnam Government's Resolution No.30a/2008/NQ-CP dated on December 27th, 2008. The main aim of P30a is to support speedy and stable poverty reduction for the 61 poorest districts in Vietnam in the period 2009-2020. During the period 2009-2010, the Vietnamese government did invest 3103 billion of VND to develop the programme to diminish poverty. According to a recent survey, out of 77, 311 planned constructions, 52 321 were constructed, around 66, 176 hectares of forest were allocated for poor individuals under the commitment of development and forest protection, around 2, 400 poor workers got to work abroad, among them there were 1,800 people passing the exam and being trained by professional foreign experts in regard with skills, language and orientation.

P134 is extracted from 134/2004/QD-TTG and refers to support for housing, productive land, residential land and water source for disadvantaged ethnic minority households with disadvantages. In addition, there are various other programmes implemented to enhance the development of ethnic minorities, largely focussing upon socio-economic issues. However, there has no comprehensive research to examine the results of these programmes for ethnic minorities in the Northern Mountain Provinces, such as Son La. The Vietnam government accepts that poverty and hunger in remote and mountainous areas of Vietnam is a persistent problem (Nguyen and Baulch 2007). As Ba et al (2002) points out, in a multi-ethnic country like Vietnam, issues related to ethnic minorities are inevitably always at the centre of attention of policy makers, researchers, and the public. In recent research, Hung et al (2011) also note that poverty dynamics in poor ethnic minority areas are complex, requiring correspondingly sensitive and flexible policy responses.

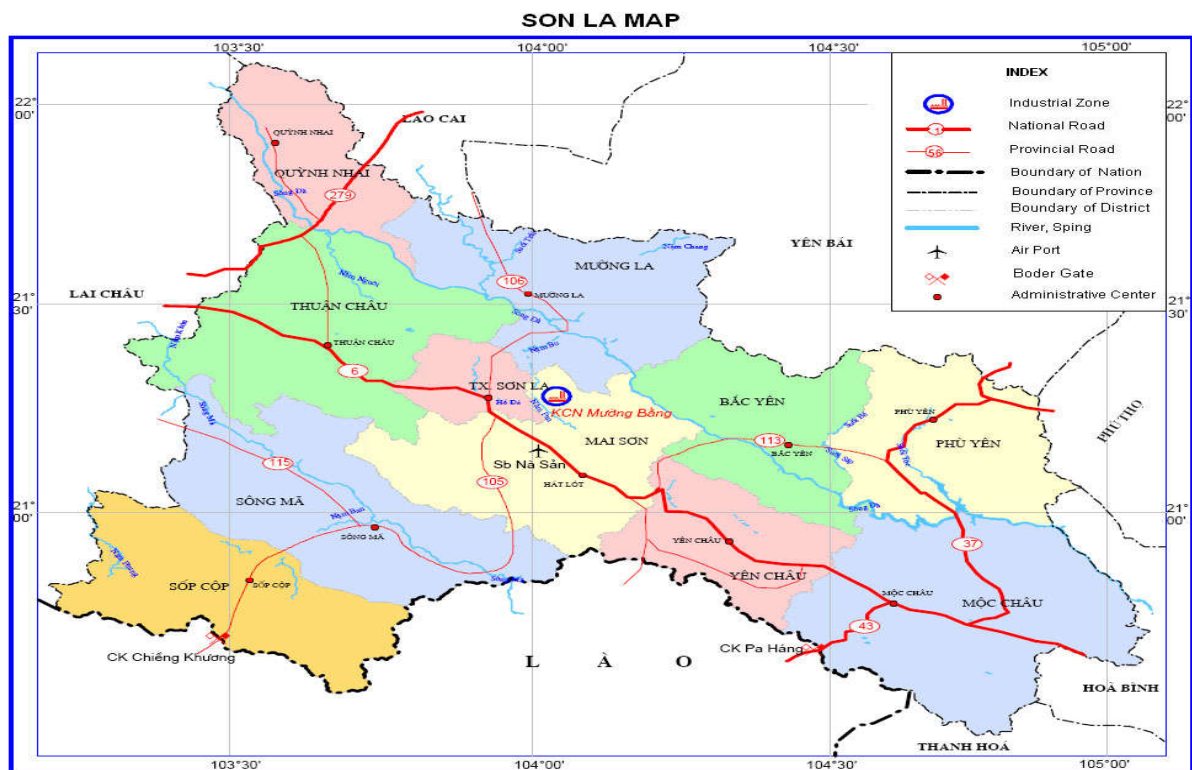
### **3.5. The picture of ethnic minorities' poverty in Son La province**

#### ***3.5.1 Basic infrastructure***

Son La is a mountainous province located in the Northwest of the poorest part of the

country and is the third largest province/city in Vietnam (Tuong 2013). It covers an area of 14,055 square kilometres, with a population of 1.093 million people in 2010 (VGSO 2010), and of which more than 83 per cent are ethnic minorities whose total population is more than 900.000 people. During the period 2006-2010, the gross output of Son La province almost tripled, from 5, 519 billion VND (2006) to 14, 566 billion (2010). By the end of 2013, per capita income in Son La province also increased from 17.0 million (£520) to 23.0 million in early of 2014 (almost £700).

Son La has 12 ethnic groups, with 11 minority groups including Thai, H'Mong, Dao, Muong, Chinese, Khang, La Ha, Lao, Tay, Kho Mu and Xinh Mun. The largest groups of these are Thai, H'Mong, Muong, Dao with population rates of 54%, 12%, 8.4% and 2.5% respectively, while 7 other small groups accounting for only 5.1% (VGSO 2010; VCEMA 2013).

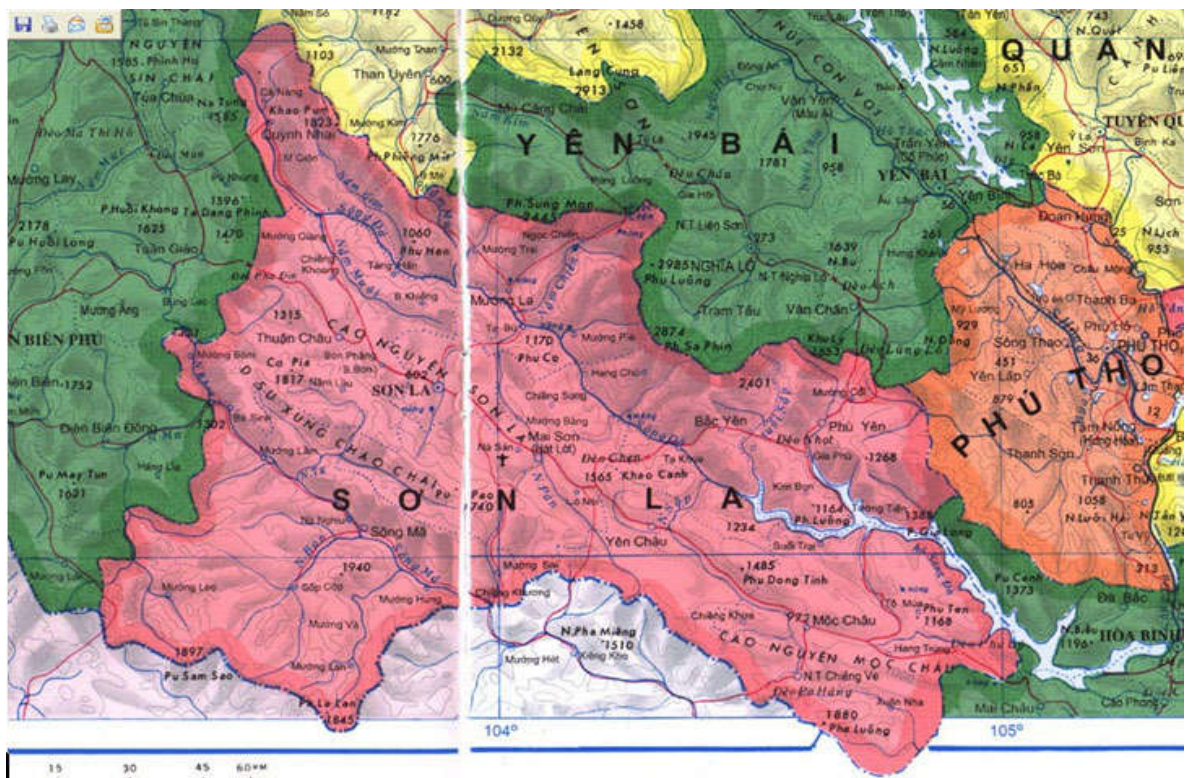


**Picture 3.1: The Map of Son La province**

Source: <http://investinvietnam.vn/report/parent-region/91/95/Son-La.aspx>

In 2017, poverty rate in Son La was 29.22 per cent, nearly five times the national average (which is less than 7 per cent). However, the expenditure poverty rate of ethnic minorities is even more marked, at 66 per cent. Market-based policies for poverty reduction amongst the poor of Son La, and Vietnam more generally, have clearly not been effective in reaching poor people living in disadvantaged areas, particularly ethnic minorities. Therefore, the need to change the basic approach in poverty reduction for ethnic minorities in Son La is key for sustainable development.

There is some existing literature on poverty reduction for ethnic minorities in Vietnam but the research to date has focussed on ethnic minorities in general rather than on Son La province as a particular case. In an ethnic minorities dominated province like Son La, poverty reduction for ethnic minorities is inevitably always at the centre of province's action development programs.



Picture 3.2: The map of Son La province.

*(Source: Son La Province web <http://sonla.gov.vn/content/81-Vi-tri-dia-ly/>)*

Two of the essential conditions for Vietnam and Son La province to escape from poverty are access to basic infrastructure and public services. Recently, there has been implementation of several policies and programmes investing in the remote areas and mountainous areas of Son La with the aim of enhancing development in the area. This aim is strongly stated in P135, and more recently P30a, along with a large number of policies supporting ethnic minorities in Vietnam. In general, 1, 119 villages in Son La are facing extremely difficult conditions, while 415 villages were in the P30a during the period 2011-2015. Now, let us analyse the access to basic infrastructure, health care service, education, income and employment amongst ethnic minorities in Son La province.<sup>2</sup>

Most parts of Son La province are covered with mountains. This basic geography does make it difficult for the population to access basic services (VGSO 2010). Though several projects have been carried out to improve the basic infrastructure, they have not been effective enough to fully enhance the development of infrastructure there. According to the Son La Province People's Committee report (2012), 68 per cent of villages possess satisfactory roads for cars and bus. In some other communes where Mong residents are living, there insufficient accessible roads for cars and other big vehicles. Many households in such villages stay at least 7.8 km away from the nearest road. In contrast, where the roads are accessible, households can only use them on average for 9.9 months in the year. Half of the roads in most communes are covered with dirt and mud. This is the origin of the low quality of roads in poor communes. More importantly, this can become the root of more prominent issues such as lack of access to health care service, market and education.

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<sup>2</sup> It is noted that the term 'minority' is used in this research to facilitate comparison with the economic literature in Vietnam that is commonly used the term 'minority' to refer to the different ethnic minorities groups. However, in Son La province the Kinh households comprises just 16 percent, therefore the ethnic minority in this research is actually the "majority" in the research site (Son La province).

In the remote and mountainous areas of Vietnam, the majority of children and young people do not engage in education due to lack of human resources and their difficulty in accessing schools. 68% to 79% of communes do not have straightforward access to primary or secondary school. For upper secondary school, the percentage of school presence is just 3 per cent. This geography also hinders the provision of health care service. Because health care services in this region do not meet the quality standards set by the government, households are forced to travel for a long distance, usually around 20 km, to the nearest health clinic. The distance from the ethnic minority households in this region to the hospital of ethnic minorities individuals is never under 10 km, on average 28 km, in comparison with 17 km for the ethnic majority.

Besides the challenges in accessing healthcare services and education, there are also many kinds of infrastructure playing an important role in determining the poverty level of ethnic minorities groups such as electricity supply, irrigation and post office services. Basically, 36% of difficult groups can reach post offices, 62% of households in poor can access irrigation system, 95% of poor communes can access good national electricity grid. Water source is also an important issue. Access to clean water is clearly important for health, especially that of children. Nonetheless, up to 86.3% of ethnic minorities in Vietnam cannot get fresh and clean water (Viet Cuong 2012). In some remote areas, this figure may come up to 100%. Besides, just 1% of poor households can get tap water. Also, more than half of the ethnic minority population do not have adwqauet sanitation services or a standard toilet.

### ***3.5.2 Education***

Education is one of the key determinants of community prosperity, household welfare, the wealth of a society, development of the labour market and the earnings of individuals (Glewwe et al. 2004). Education development is something Vietnam

has been focusing on in recent years (Glewwe et al. 2004). The development of a standard educational system is considered a crucial factor for the whole development of society and for economic growth.

According to VHLSS (2010), ethnic minorities in Vietnam in general and in Son La in particular have been observed to obtain some outstanding improvements in the educational system (Evans and Harkness 2008), mostly for children (Un 2010; Hung. et al. 2011). Nonetheless, there still remains a large gap in the approach to education between the ethnic minority and majority group. According to recent research from Viet Cuong (2012), just 20 per cent of the total number of households in the Northern Mountain poor area can get access to primary school, and among them 66 per cent cannot complete the primary school programme. Only 20 per cent of households in ethnic minority communities can access the primary school programme. Son La Province People's Committee Report (2012) illustrates the educational level in some poor communes in this area. Only 7 per cent of people aged higher than 22 could complete the programme of upper secondary school. Less than 1 per cent of them can access post-secondary education. More than 50% could not obtain any official educational degree.

Within ethnic minority communes, there exists educational inequality among ethnic minority groups. While the Kinh and Hoa can get better educational levels, ethnic minority groups including Dao, Mong, Thai, Muong achieve the lowest educational level. According to the 2010 VHLSS, the rate of school enrolment of children in primary and secondary school in Son La is very low. Only 80 per cent of children could attend school in 2010. The percentage of children able to attend secondary school is even lower than that of primary school, which is about 60 per cent and 38 per cent respectively. The rate for schooling is also different between ethnic minorities regions, especially for higher levels of education. For the most part of Thai group, they have a higher rate for upper secondary school than other groups.

Simultaneously, the enrolment rate for school of Dao, Kho Mu, H'mong groups is extremely low. It is essential for ethnic minorities that appropriate programmes to enhance the quality of educational system for children in remote areas are implemented, to enable access to school, thereby also supplying high quality labour for their families, communities and society.

### ***3.5.3 Healthcare services***

Generally, access to standard health care service is a key determinant of a healthy community. The Vietnamese government has recently focused significant resources in a bid to improve health services in some remote areas. However, in some mountainous and remote regions whose density is covered mostly by ethnic minority, the health service is still of low quality resulting in poor health throughout the region and contributing to the high rate of poverty there. With specific actions from local authorities, the rate of households able to adopt free health insurance increased from 8 per cent to 78 per cent during the period 1998 to 2012 (VGSO 2010). However, access to free health insurance does not necessarily mean that ethnic minorities can access a high-quality and inexpensive service. At some places in remote areas, the health care clinics are still in poor condition. Furthermore, even gaining access to these clinics is extremely challenging because the distance from households to the nearest hospital is often more than 30 km, which would take individuals around 3 hours by public transport. In terms of the outpatient healthcare service, the percentage of individuals using this service amongst ethnic minorities is far lower than in the ethnic majority. With increasing demands for good quality and accessible health care services amongst ethnic minorities, it is necessary that Son La should carry out specific and effective projects to improve the health of the whole community.

### ***3.5.4 Income and employment***

Amongst ethnic minorities, the rate of unemployment is unusually high, related to



the relative lack of access to school and education. This is, in turn, the main reason leading to the low income status of many households in Son La. In fact, most of the ethnic minority households in Son La province attain just 4724.9 thousand VND/person/year (£140/person/year). This is a very low income level in comparison with the average level of income for ethnic minorities in other regions of Vietnam.

There is, in fact, a quite large gap between the non poor and the poor within Son La. The incomes per capita of the non-poor and the poor are 8551.3 thousand VND and 2869.0 thousand VND (£260 and £87) respectively. It is seen that most income of Son La households stem from the activities of agriculture, especially livestock and crops. Just less than 20 per cent of households get their income from non-farm activities. As Son La and the Northern part are located on the large land covered with forestry land and crops, ethnic minorities are able to cultivate these areas for income. This is the reason why most of the households in Son La possess large crop land (Viet Cuong 2012). Income coming from crops represents more than 60 per cent of ethnic minority income in Son La, while it is just 37% in the rest of the regions of the nation. As for the share of wages of income from households in Son La province, it just accounts for 1/3 of total income comparing with the majority population.

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During the period from 2007 to 2012, the average income of households coming from ethnic minorities increased by 20%. Such households receiving higher income had the chance to experience a faster growth rate than that of households with lower income levels (Hung. et al. 2011). It has been the transformation from farm activities to non-farm ones which has created the improvement in the share of income from wage. Though this is being proceeded at a slow rate, this embodies a positive improvement in income of households amongst ethnic minorities in Son La.

### **3.6. Status of poverty reduction in Son La Province**

#### ***3.6.1 The importance of households' participation***

Several plans and projects on poverty reduction in Son La have been identified. At the grassroots level, the participation of households plays a vital role in the process of project planning. In order to reflect well the choice of construction project at the local level, households have to express an active and effective participation in project selection. Many programmes and policies tried to encourage households to participate in these projects. There are 56.1, 79.3, 83 and up to 90 per cent of households in 2007, 2010, 2012 and 2017 respectively participating in local selection meetings. This figure proves an increase in the household awareness about these issues. However, just 40 per cent of poor households attended the selection meetings in 2012. This shows that more than half of poor households got overlooked during the selection stage of projects. Although ethnic minority groups have become extremely involved in the selection stage of projects, they often remain passive during selection meeting discussions. Hung et al (2011) pointed to many reasons which make it difficult for them to express their opinion. Firstly, most ethnic minority collectives utilize their local language during the time of group discussion while the direction and pertinent records are composed in Kinh or Vietnamese language. This language barrier keeps the ethnic minorities from communicating their conclusions in a reasonable way. Secondly, attendants are assumed to be equipped with socio - economic background information for powerful participation; however, the information has not been appropriately collected by the researcher. Accordingly, participants are not well-informed preceding the meeting. Therefore, choice process have often not well reflected family households' assessments but rather those of the upper managerial levels. Among the individuals who voice out their feelings, 25.8 percent of family holds have their thoughts taken.

### ***3.6.2 Some challenges in the poverty reduction process in Son La***

In remote communes or areas, some places are covered with 100 per cent of population from ethnic minorities. Where projects are implemented, the negative results of a prior project can be transparent. Some of these were conducted by urban-based individuals without input from indigenous persons who are assumed to benefit from the project. Despite the fact that such projects were well prepared, they still ignored the real demand and needs of indigenous people. Going through mountainous areas of Vietnam, it is easily seen that there are several unused schools which were built in the wrong places, making it difficult for teachers and children to access because they did not survey thoroughly and consult with the indigenous people before building. Another significant example for this is the plantation of rubber, mulberry and tea which were unsuccessfully cultivated by farmers because the project designers failed to properly analyze full transportation costs and prices (Oanh 2010:16).

There still remain some significant challenges to ethnic minority poverty reduction and development projects in Son La province that both government and individuals from ethnic minorities should consider solutions for as soon as possible. Such challenges often stem from controversy, clashes and contradictions between government and authorities, between authorities and local residents.

### **3.7. Conclusion**

Despite the fact that many programmes for ethnic minority advancement have been developed by the Government and Province People's Committee, access to public services for ethnic minorities remains limited and restricted when compared to the ethnic majority. Education levels among adults and school enrolment among children are both significantly lower for ethnic minorities. There is likewise a vast distinction in educational achievement among ethnic minority collectives. The Kho

mu, Dao and Mong are ethnic minority collectives which have the lowest levels of education and the least enrolment rates. The utilization of health care service is also lower for ethnic minorities than for the ethnic majority. Nonetheless, the utilization of health care service for ethnic minorities has improved, if not at the rate of the rest of the nation. The best health care services strategy for ethnic minorities might come in the form of the expansion in health insurance provided for ethnic minorities. The rate of insured individuals among ethnic minorities expanded recently and is considerably higher than the rate of the insured among the majority group. For such extremely difficult groups, the infrastructure is notable in poor conditions. According to Baulch et al (2008), while all of these well meaning programmes and policies seem to concentrate on enhancing the development of ethnic minorities as well as the commune, very few policies or programmes use asset based approaches to address the problems in the communes so that poverty can be addressed in a sustainable way. This only sustains the large proportion of ethnic households in in permanent poverty. Over the last four years, 24 per cent of these households emerged from poverty, but 14.3 per cent of these fell back into poverty within a two year period. Jones et al. (2009) also pointed out that people who live mostly in ethnic minorities and mountainous areas and remain poor usually find it challenging to get out of poverty due to the restriction in access to information, resources and land. Furthermore, household participation in the poverty reduction and policy design process remains low so they have not got the opportunity to use their assets to solve their own and community problems.

A recent Worldbank report (2013b: i) evaluated that, despite remarkable progress, the task of reducing poverty in regions of Vietnam has not been completed but becomes more and more difficult in many respects. In fact, many household incomes are getting nearer to the poverty line and remain vulnerable to falling back to the threshold of poverty. The poverty reduction progress is being slowed down, it may become less compatible with economic growth. Many new challenges have been created through the success of economic growth, especially the vulnerable and

disadvantaged position of ethnic minorities. Furthermore, organizations as divergent as Oxfam, the Worldbank and Harvard University are now in agreement that a lack of resident participation in poverty reduction and development processes means top-down planning which ignores indigenous knowledge, skills and practices and fails to appreciate the crucial contribution that these can make to the success of a development programme in their own area. This can then become one of the main things that sustains poverty (Oanh 2010: 14). Therefore, application of assets-based approaches and motivating resident participation in the community development and poverty reduction process could possibly become one of the effective solutions to poverty, especially in a poor remote province such as Son La, Vietnam.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter will discuss the research methodology adopted by the project and how the fieldwork, to be reported and analysed in subsequent chapters in an attempt to answer the research questions, was conducted. A multifaceted methodological approach will be outlined, given that the aims of the project are to obtain data relevant to the research topic such as: assets inside the ethnic minority communities, the picture of poverty reduction and current policies for ethnic minorities in Son La and the role of these communities in the poverty reduction and community development process.

We begin with an outline of the analytical framework that was used to shape the data collection from various sources. Then, the rationale for choosing a case study approach in this research will be explained. Following this, a number of techniques used to obtain the desired data will be detailed, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation and secondary data collection. Some major ethical issues will be also stated. In the subsequent section, the challenges and shortcomings in employing the chosen methodological approach will be acknowledged. In this chapter the whole process of the research activities beginning from the preparatory stage in the UK through to all activities in Vietnam will be discussed. The chapter ends with a summary and a conclusion.

#### **4.2. Research design and methods**

In selecting a research design, the nature of the apparent association between hypothesis and research suggested by the research question, and additionally epistemological and ontological considerations will be influential, as qualitative and quantitative research strategies differ incredibly in each of these regards (Bryman 2012). A research methodology, whether it is qualitative or quantitative, depends on some underlying suppositions about what constitutes legitimate research and which one is the best and the most reasonable technique. The status of this qualification is ambiguous since it is regarded by a few writers as a key contrast and by others as no more valuable or even essentially as false (Bryman 2012). However, the most transparent distinction between two sorts of research methodologies is that qualitative research manages small sample sizes yet more in-depth examination of verbal records in regular dialect created by the specialist or sources and/or full transcripts from sound or video recording of occasions, while quantitative research typically manages bigger information sets and utilizes statistical information (Cohen et al. 2011).

Previously, contention about which of the above two research strategies is better was normal and it was commonly accepted that there was an apparent distinction between the two. Today, most authors agree that there is no dichotomy between the two methods. ‘Both qualitative and quantitative methods can be utilized adequately as a part of similar research. For instance, a research study may utilize large survey samples as in sentiment surveys or house incomes which includes statistical information yet would analyse this qualitatively. However, most projects and researchers place their emphasis on one form or another, partly out of conviction but also because of training and the nature of problem studied’ (Corbin and Strauss 2008). For this particular project, the author initially planned to utilize a set of techniques utilizing both qualitative and quantitative tools for data collection and analysis. However, due to restricted time and budgets, and most significantly the low education levels of the ethnic minority respondents, the author exclusively used qualitative tools for data collection and analysis.

Qualitative research places emphasis upon exploring and understanding ‘the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem’ (Cresswell 2014: 4). Qualitative research can refer to research about a person’s life, stories and behavior and additionally about global relationships, organizational functions or social developments. The method brings together findings from sources gathered by various means of collection and analysis. These incorporate observations and interviews, however may also include records, books, video tapes, and even information that was initially intended for different purposes, such as census data (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Qualitative research can include the collection and study of a range of empirical material: case studies; individual experiences; biographies; thoughtfulness; antiquities; interviews; cultural content and preparations; interactional and visual writings that portray ‘normal’ and problematic moments and meaning in individual lives. The qualitative approach also takes the wider social-structural and global context, within which individual experience takes place, into consideration, incorporating the specific circumstances of distinctive social groups within their appropriate social, political and cultural context (Denzin and Lincoln 2013: 5-7).

The qualitative method is extensively interpretative as it is concerned with how the social world is deciphered, delivered, experienced or constituted. It depends on the examination techniques that are adaptable and sensitive to the social context in which information is created. It is an arranged action that locates the observers, comprising of an arrangement of interpretive, material practices that make the world noticeable (Denzin and Lincoln 2013). The qualitative approach itself is an exemplification of an assortment of different techniques including interviews, focus group discussion and direct observations, which have been utilized in this research project. The approach adopted in this project follows Riehl (2001: 49), who states that a ‘qualitative analyst breaks down their information in nonmathematical



approaches to comprehend the world on its own terms’.

#### **4.3. Case study approach for research design**

Following an extensive review and intensive study of the range of social research methodologies available for undertaking this project, the case study technique was observed to be the most appropriate approach to deliver the aims and address the research questions of this project. Case study is one of the methodologies that falls under the general heading of qualitative strategy. Basically, a case means a ‘specific case, an occasion, an event, and the arrangement of situations that surround this’ (Thomas 2011: 13). A case can be studied with respect to an individual or group, for example, family members or an organization. A case study is an intensive investigation to answer particular questions associated with an individual, group or organization, and which may also exemplify more general processes or trends (Woods 2005). It is an approach commonly utilized within social science and has been particularly influential when examining group based issues such as poverty, unemployment, lack of education and drug addiction, to name only a few (Johnson 2006).

Case studies specifically involve a social scientist building up an in-depth examination of a case, frequently a programme, occasion, movement, organization or process, or an individual. Cases are limited by time and action, and analysts gather detailed data utilizing an assortment of information collection strategies and over a particular timeframe (Creswell 2014: 14; Yin 2009, 2012). As Yin (2009: 8-9) clarifies, case studies are favoured when ‘how’ or ‘why’ enquiries are required, when the researcher has little control over occasions, and when the emphasis is on a contemporary, often dynamic, ever-changing issue within real life contexts. Yin (2009:8) additionally demonstrates that the decision to utilize this research technique is typically shaped by three major conditions: (1) the kind of research

questions stated; (2) the degree of control a researcher has over real behavioral events; (3) the extent of contemporary, as opposed to historic, events and processes within the phenomena under study.

The research aims and questions of this project – to examine the current and prospective destitution lessening process for ethnic minorities in Son La province Vietnam, as well as a consideration of how current strategies and projects bolster poor ethnic minorities to enhance their expectations for everyday comforts, emphasizing the role of neighborhood inhabitants in poverty reduction processes and the asset-based approach to deal with group development process – comply with the above three conditions and indicated that the case study approach was the best way to embark upon this investigation. Some researchers, for example, Yin (2009), Gomm et al.(2000) and Thomas (2011) also note that the case study permits researchers to investigate genuinely complex social processes and phenomena, a solitary case study can make a highly noteworthy contribution to learning, hypothesis assemblage and be an entirely helpful apparatus for testing speculations. As Thatcher (2006: 1631) states, ‘the case study is one of the most prominent research strategies in contemporary sociology or more precisely, in contemporary humanism and political science’. Nevertheless, a case study is usually focussed upon the specific rather than the general and is not often seen as an appropriate basis for speculation. It is often alleged that ‘you can't sum up from a case study’ (Thomas 2011: 3). This view has remained one of the key arguments against the case study (Yin 2012). This would pose the challenge to us as to how far our investigation of destitution diminishment for ethnic minority groups in the Son La region has implications or lessons for those in neighbouring North-west regions of Vietnam, or different minority groups across the wider, various territories of Vietnam.

#### *4.3.1 Case study selection*

Case selection is a process of picking cases for case study research, and the

selection of cases is of the most critical and significant issues shaping the likelihood or otherwise of being able to generalize, theoretically or practically, from the cases chosen (Johansson 2004). The author took the meanings of 'case' and 'case study' proposed by Gerring (2004) to inform selection and procedure. A 'case' is 'a spatially limited phenomenon observed at a solitary point in time or over some delimited timeframe' (342). Figuring out what the case will include helps to determine whether it will concentrate on an individual, group, establishment or a community. The latter was the case with this research. The cases to be chosen in this research were the ethnic minority groups from across Son La province, the North West mountain area of Vietnam.

As discussed previously, this project investigates ethnic minority poverty in Son La and the role of ABCD in destitution decrease and social mobility. More specifically, the objectives are to study the dynamics and experience of poverty among various ethnic groups alongside researching accessible, existing resources for poverty alleviation, and to provide policy-makers and organizers with data on ethnic minority issues in order to design the best strategies to diminish the destitution rate amongst ethnic minority groups in Son La, in a sustainable manner. According to Seawright and Gerring (2008: 294) 'case selection is the primordial task of the case study researcher'. Case selection is a hugely important task and the cases chosen have to be the representative of the whole ethnic minority communities across Son La province in aspects of gender, age, religion, culture, population and geography, at least partly to counter the major criticism of the case study approach outlined above – its specificity and lack of generalizability.

In order to compare differences and similarities in terms of poverty and poverty policies for ethnic minorities, the fieldwork was conducted in four districts and five communes in Son La province: Phong Lai, Nam Lau and Chieng Bom in Thuan Chau districts; Chieng Ngan located in Son La city and Chieng Hac located in Moc

Chau district. In addition to interviews held at district and province level and some other areas, observations were also carried out in Suoi Giang district, Yen Bai province; Phu Yen, Yen Chau and Song Ma districts in Son La province. Secondary data was collected from other districts by Son La Province's Statistical Department and province principals. This research cases selection enabled the author to compare the impact of government policies on the same ethnic minorities living in different geographical areas and the differing participation of residents within the poverty reduction process, thereby also discovering the differing assets within the communities chosen, and also the appropriate, or otherwise, application of ABCD in addressing ethnic minority poverty in a sustainable manner.

Son La is located in the economic centre of the North West of Vietnam, where 12 ethnic groups live widespread across the province. The author acknowledges that Son La itself is an incredibly ethnically heterogeneous society with Black Thai having the most influence and H'Mong being the second highest population for the most part of province. The largest ethnic groups are Thai, H'Mong (Meo) and Muong with population rates of 54%, 12% and 8.4% respectively (VGSO 2010; VCEMA 2013). Given the constraints of time and resources, five communities were selected as representatives of the most prevalent ethnic minority groups and groups of poverty in Son La province. More than 90 per cent of ethnic minorities live in rural areas and a large number of communes and districts are located in the remote and mountainous areas throughout the province, while only a small number of people are living in the urban (delta) areas. Therefore, to select the five communes above, the author was confronting the difficulty of representing the ethnicity of the whole region.

The communes chosen which were close to national streets, for example, Chieng Ngan, were easier to be accessed as there were great transport facilities. Such remote areas as Nam Lau, Chieng Bom, Phong Lai and Chieng Hac were more

difficult to be accessed because of poor transportation. Some villages even just relied upon walking and couldn't be reached via auto or motorbike. Besides, there was no road associating between some remote parts. The selection of cases was influenced by the author's own association with local experts and regional knowledge. The author also examined the geology of the Son La area, where he has worked for ten years. After arriving in Vietnam from the UK in May 2013 in order to conduct a period of fieldwork, the author was advised by one of the masters of Son La province People's Committee and the Committee of Ethnicity and Mountainous Areas (CEMA) of Son La region to pick these communes as cases for research. The reason given was that they were specifically inspired by the circumstance of ethnic minority individuals - as Nam Lau, Chieng Bom, and Phong Lai collectives are very huge cooperatives prevalently populated by Black Thai, while Chieng Hac and Chieng Ngan cooperatives are transcendently populated by H'Mong and other ethnic minorities. These two ethnic minority groups are predominant within the population of Son La province, with more than three quarters of the entire province population constituted by them.

#### *4.3.2 Sample selection*

One of the main tasks in picking a sample is to identify the sampling units. These units must not overlap, and taken together as they should cover the whole population of intrigue (Scheaffer et al.2011; Cochran 2007), and the selected participants need to have the fundamental experience identified by the research questions (Hay 2010: 157). However, according to Barber et al. (1997: 193), such samples from developing countries can result in so many obstacles like Census information, which are frequently lacking. Units to be examined, for example, households frequently do not have any exceptional recognizable proof of identity - an address or telephone number for instance. Consequently, in order to choose an appropriate sample for the research that covers the whole population under focus, the author had to rely upon some primary criteria and rules.

Firstly, some preparatory casual interviews with local residents in every district were conducted, following Hay's recommendation (2010: 43). These were done to collect initial important data, to comprehend chosen destinations and were named exploratory work. This work is extremely important - exploratory work (for instance perusing, observation, watching TV documentaries, and leading preparatory interviews) will regularly give us the ability to start to fathom the perspectives of key witnesses. Following this, the author decided to choose participants by utilizing the snowball sampling method since it is utilized fundamentally for exploratory purposes (Babbie 2011). This method was started with a person who was accessible by the author. Then, the author requested her/him to propose different respondents. These individuals ought to have experience of being poor or have expressed a concern about the poverty reduction procedure of the community and should be willing to participate in the fieldwork. In the event that they recommended respondents, the author could get access to them to gather the information required and asked them to introduce different respondents who may fit the criteria of the fieldwork, again being poor or having some encounters in the poverty diminishment process. This procedure continued until the required number of the respondents were researched (Bernard 2011: 185-186; Sarantakos 1993: 153-154; Hay 2010: 44). The quantity of the respondents who were discovered utilizing this technique will be discussed in more detail below.

Overton and Van Diermen (2003: 43) contend that the snowball strategy 'can be a helpful system for selecting respondents with specific attributes where the data on individuals with those qualities is deficient'. Since the research areas were situated in a remote mountainous region, adverse terrain with numerous ethnic minorities living there and sparse density as well as an absence of comprehension about neighborhood population and their attributes, the snowball system was deemed appropriate (Babbie 2012: 184; Bernard 2011: 185). Additionally, this method

helped the author to defeat one of the fundamental obstacles to selecting interviewees, winning their trust, as well as helping in identifying further respondents with appropriate experience or background (Flowerdew and Martin 2005: 142).

Despite the fact that representativeness is still highlighted as an issue amongst analysts and critics of both qualitative and quantitative social research (Sarantakos 1993: 25-27; Hay 2010: 44-45; Overton and van Diermen 2003: 44; Brockington and Sullivan 2003: 57-73) and the constraints of time and resources, this fieldwork still attempts to acquire a representative selection of residents. This becomes extremely important when summarizing the research findings and attempting to draw general conclusions (Sarantakos 1993: 26). Thus, grounded on the above discussion, the selections of the respondents depended on some criteria.

To begin with, individuals who have encountered poverty were selected (Hay 2010: 89). The general population chosen comprehend that they were poor and had already been included in a poverty reduction process. For example, they realized that they lacked adequate housing, electricity, incomes and human services. They likewise had difficulties in searching for permanent employment, or even lost the chance to see doctors when they experienced sickness. The second selection criteria was ethnicity. The chosen participants originated from various ethnic groups in the chosen community to guarantee their representativeness of the 12 ethnic groups living in Son La province. The third selection criteria was homogeneity of participants (Bernard 2011: 186; Hay 2010: 90). To obtain the representative sample, the researcher selected a small group from the total population of local residents. Each of chosen communes was populated by local individuals who shared the same characteristics. In general, they were agriculturists, who joined cultivating with an assortment of other work. Knowledge of this homogeneity was based on the author's previous experience in Son La region and also came from the exploratory

interviews (see above) conducted in every selected district. Fourth, the selected participants knew each other. Since participants stayed in the same locations, they must know each other. It was critical to utilize snowball sampling technique, where a person or groups selected recommend others, that those suggesting new respondents at least have good overview about those they are recommending (Hay 2010: 90; Bernard 2011: 186-186). Having excellent knowledge about other individuals is critical for collecting the appropriate data.

The number of respondents to be interviewed within a research project can vary considerably, often depending upon the research technique utilized. As indicated by Wilmot (2005: 4), the size of a qualitative examination may expect to accomplish somewhere around 20 and 50 interviews for a coordinated examination and around 60 to 100 members for group interviews, when addressing a research question. For focus groups, Hay (2010: 91) contends that the number of respondents in every group is somewhere between four and ten. Less than four, he argues, would restrain the discussion while more than ten would limit the ideal opportunity for inhabitants to take an interest. Following the above, the selection procedure and total number of respondents utilized by this project will now be outlined.

When the author returned to Vietnam from the UK in May 2013, Son La province People's Committee gave the author a consent letter to conduct fieldwork in the chosen collectives. Simultaneously, the Committee of Ethnicity and Mountainous Areas (CEMA) of Son La province supported the author with a presentation letter as a government assistant to the pioneer of these collectives to enable the conduction of research in their commune area. They also gave the author the aid of an interpreter, who demonstrated the way to remote villages and helped the author to translate the ethnic minority language into Vietnamese. After interviewing the authoritative chairman and a portion of the workplace staff, the author was introduced to the heads of these communes. The research objectives



were also shown and explained to them. At each commune, there were always some people showing the author to villages, on behalf of the commune heads, where the author had selected a sample of people to interview.

With a specific goal of recruiting participants in the chosen villages in every collective, the author solicited the head from the villages and communes to assemble a town conference. After clarifying some details of the research and introducing some local residents who had already participated, the author invited potential members to participate in the research. The author distributed consent forms to participants and gathered their opinions and concerns. They were invited to participate in the research voluntarily without being forced to join because the author did not want to put any pressure on their participation if they had any reservations. At the point when further enquiries were forthcoming, the author read out the part of the consent form that outlined the rights of participants. A considerable number of residents instantly consented to participate at that point.

Following the interviews, the leaders of these villages and communes showed the author around their villages and communes. Over the following few days after the interviews, a large number of residents and farmers came to voluntarily participate in the research. During the time of fieldwork (May to July 2013 and November 2013 to January 2014), the author recruited a number of participants. There was a total of 74 respondents in 5 communes in 3 districts including 36 Thai Den individuals, 17 H'Mong individuals, 14 Kinh, 5 Muong, 1 Dao, and 1 Lao individuals, fully representing the ethnic minorities of Son La province. 34 of them participated as interviewees while the rest got involved in focus group discussions with 5 groups. On average, there was one group discussion with 6 people in each commune. At the beginning of each interview and focus group, the author additionally clarified how they would take part in the research, interview and focus group discussion, as well as how the author needed to have the capacity to

participate in and observe their daily life. The author also conducted interviews with 19 governmental assistants and officers at district and province level, 2 NGO officers and 4 specialists of ethnic minorities in the North West of Vietnam. During the fieldwork, the author regularly stayed with a neighborhood family, typically the group of one of the leaders of the villages and communes. The author had dinner with them and spent a large part of the day in their home and got involved in a wide assortment of activities and interacted with visiting families to their home.

A total of 74 interviews were conducted with specialists at both national and worldwide level, all of whom had long involvement in poverty reduction in Vietnam, especially in the North West of Vietnam and Son La province. A group discussion of 6-10 individuals was chosen in each commune including: representatives of province offices: foreign Affairs, planning and investment; agriculture and Rural Development; Committee for EM; Statistical Office: Farmers Association; Women's Union. At the district division, representatives of the following participated in the group discussions: Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs; Agriculture and Rural Development, Finance and Planning, Fatherland Front. The above core groups were in charge of monitoring in their own particular province, and they were included in discussions which planned and drafted the fieldwork and the data collection process.

The fieldtrip to each province followed a common structure. The first day was spent at the provincial level including interviews with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development; Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs; Women's Union; and the Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs. Three or four days were then spent in every district starting with interviews at the local level, trailed by a couple of days in selected communes to visit ethnic minority agriculturists and tradespeople and conducting focus groups with youngsters and farmers' groups. Separate interview guides were created for commonplace

authorities, collective, mass association staff, ethnic minority villagers, and youth. The selection of communes was directed in conjunction with district authorities. In some cases, the researchers recognized communes from recommendation or secondary literature. While in others local authorities recommended communes to be visited. Commune leaders and mass association agents thus acquainted the researcher with nearby villagers. The course of action of visits through authority channels empowered access to the selected areas; local authorities were flexible and cooperative in considering the group's solicitations. The association of authorities may have influenced a few respondents' answers, particularly in Dak Lak where powers were present in all interviews.

Prior to the beginning of the regional visits, the author built up a progression of theories of conceivable variables prompting to positive deviance, aiming at outlining a system for qualitative data collection. These 'provocative propositions' were then investigated through interviews and observation in field locales.

#### *4.3.3 Data collection*

During the conduct of the case study research, the researcher utilized more than one strategy to gather information about the case. According to the literature, strategies can vary depending on the case and related research questions, but they frequently incorporate interviews, oral history, ethnography and archive examination (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011: 256). This study utilized two principle techniques for data collection: (i) semi-structured interviews and (ii) focus group discussion. The supplementary method was secondary data collection. There are two fundamental sorts of information to be collected, primary and secondary data. With the purpose of collecting in-depth information relating to the poverty reduction procedure for ethnic minorities in Son La province, this research project utilized focus group discussion (FGDs), members observation and qualitative interviews as the primary data collection methods.

Overall, this study employs a variety of methodologies. For the first two research questions, descriptive analysis using statistical references will be used to inform both at average and a number of disaggregate dimensions. At the average, the analysis will provide a narrative of the characteristics of the poor ethnic minorities as a broad ethnic minority group in comparison with the majority group. In addition to this majority-minority dimension, the current report adopts a further *five dimensions* for the analysis. Given the high centralization of ethnic minorities around there, the researcher aimed at giving the research at the most disaggregate level of ethnicity (in addition to conventional ‘majority-minority’ classification) and considering the extent of the sub-tests for individual ethnic gatherings. In order to make statistically meaningful references, any individual ethnic groups having more than 100 observations in the sample of the BLS are treated as a separate ethnic group. Therefore, the report adopts a classification of 14 ethnic groups including the Kinh (or the majority),<sup>7</sup> Tay, Thai, Muong, Nung, Dao, Mong, ‘others in the Northern Uplands’, Bana, H’re, Co Tu, ‘others in the Central Highlands’, Khmer, and finally other ethnic groups (i.e. the other groups that not reside in the Northern Uplands or Central Highlands. It is desirable to provide analysis on further disaggregate ethnic classification. However, this is constrained by data availability (see Annex 2 for further details).

In addition to the ethnicity dimension, Vietnamese language capability is chosen as the another measurement for the investigation in this study. It is generally perceived that Vietnamese language capability of ethnic minorities is an extremely important factor for their combination of the general public and along these lines living conditions. The researcher will hence receive the three levels of Vietnamese language capability. Further, gender of household heads could be a vital driver of basic leadership forms inside families, and therefore we likewise considered this as an essential measurement of the study. The researcher considers spatial contrasts in

living conditions by releasing detailed indicators according to regions and by geographical characteristics (i.e. whether communes are coastal and delta which incorporate midland or mountainous communes). This study will recognize the poor people and the non-poor ones while leaving the analysis in all the chapters. Further details on these measurements of investigation are given in Annex 2.

Initially, the mixed method was chosen as the collected data strategy. However after a questionnaire was pilot-tested and delivered to about 25 people in a face-to-face interview between researcher and participants, who were recruited through the introduction of the leader of the communes. However, the received results was the same and almost of them and toward the one answer relating to poverty in their family, thus, researcher cannot collected any information from these datas.

#### *4.3.3.1 Observations*

The member perceptions empowered the author as an analyst to familiarize within the social and cultural milieu that will demonstrate significance throughout the research. It gives a nuanced comprehension of context that is accessed through personal experience. Since the ABCD approach is basically relationship-driven, participants observation has no substitute to comprehend phenomena of human communication (Mack et al. 2005). The author utilized participant observation, which is usually called unstructured perception (Thomas 2011: 165) to discover how ethnic minorities individuals sorted out their every day lives. (Silverman 2011: 147) One of the qualities of observational research is its capacity to shift focus as interesting new data becomes accessible and unstructured perception can help the specialists to record as much as possible of what they perceive in order to develop a narrative account of behaviour observed. The process of observation helps a social scientist to choose which are the key areas that they need to concentrate on, so the focus will become narrower (Bryman 2012: 257).

As specified previously, the author frequently stayed in the houses of leaders of villages and communes at the time of the fieldwork, and sometimes accompanied the residents to the field to achieve a full understanding of how they live. The researcher took photographs, took notes and got some information about their interest in the harvests and the tree planting. The researcher could see that their production was not necessarily as effective as they desired. An enormous range of woods had been crushed. Income level of some villages was generally derived from firewood and speedy developing species, for example, cassava, corn and bamboo. Some other villages such as Lai Le in Phong Lai commune, Ta So in Chieng Hac community could gather the herbs to offer yet they were not as easily accessible as before. The vast majority of villages, particularly H'Mong Ethnic in Chieng Hac Commune, Moc Chau area and Ta Xua commune in Bac Yen District, Phong Lai commune in Thuan Chau region planted cassava and corn on developed uplands but due to the lack of water and investment in fertilizer, the efficiency was not high. During the fieldwork period, the researcher was given many chances to attend the resident daily activities. The researcher spent few days talking with some women who were planting corn and listened to their stories about how hard their lives were. Another day, the author went to catch frogs with the men in an irrigated field in Chieng Bom commune, Thuan Chau District. In the few another days, he participated in a group project to build the stilt house (“nhà sàn” in Vietnamese) and repaired the roof of another house in Phong Lai commune, Thuan Chau District. Several days later, the author was fortunate to be invited to a wedding and joined the feasting that accompanied in Phong Lai commune. The main rice harvest in early May and the winter crop at the end of September. But almost of farmers did not have harvesting machines to do the work for them and everything had to be done manually, using hands and buffalos (See the picture 1). In some villages such as Kien Xuong, Dong Quan, Thu Vu in Phong Lai commune; Ta so 1, Ta So 2 in Chieng Hac commune, Nam Tron village in Chieng Ngan commune, the husbands had to go in search of jobs, which were normally manual jobs and low paid. I also shared the meals with the local families. The basic meal was very simple and was marked by the lack of protein.



**Picture 4.1: Cultivation of Thai Den in Son La city**

*Source: Photos from fieldwork in Chieng Ngan commune, Son La City, January, 2014.*

The research fieldwork was undertaken in a rainy season. Wherever it rained, the roads quickly became soft with mud (*See picture 4.2*). Only the main road to the centre of some communes was paved. Most of children had to stay at home even in the school days because their parents could not take them to the school either by bicycle or motorbike. And it was very hard for the reseacher to get from one place to another even walk because the road became too slippery and muddy. Normally, it took people only five minutes to pass this stretch of road, but on the rainy day it took at least 30 minutes and it was not unusual to fall down many times.



**Picture 4.2: The land road in the rainy season in Chieng Bom commune,  
Thuan Chau district**

*Source: Photos from fieldwork in Chieng Bom commune, Thuan Chau  
District, November, 2013.*

After about six months leading the fieldwork in Son La area of Vietnam, the author felt acquainted with the vast majority of the exercises that took up the season of Son La ethnic minority everyday lives. After each day passing by, the author took down some notes of everything which were listened, seen and done. The author took the photographs of the spots and individuals around the selected case. Before returning to the UK to proceed with the current research, the author additionally took his family to visit some of the families where the author lived when leading the project. During the time of living with the inhabitants at these communes, the author needed to utilize interpreter provided by the commune or CEMA of Son La province to support the author in deciphering from ethnic minority language to Vietnamese and comprehend the way of life and traditions of the participants. In spite of having been a government assistant of Son La area for a long time and feeling that he had comprehended the language and traditions of indigenous individuals, the author needed the translator to avoid mistakes and ensure reliable data. In



addition, other individuals, local individuals would give direction on individuals and the area of houses, individuals in the remote villages in the communes where the author needed to reach.

#### *4.3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews*

The most broadly utilized strategy in qualitative research is the interview, and has been expected as part of the 'highest quality level' for qualitative research (Bryman 2012: 113), to help a social scientist to see how meaning varies among the general population (Hay 2010: 102). There are numerous approaches to structure an interview: structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Olsen 2012: 33; Corbetta 2003: 269; Gilbert 2008). The structured interview such as those utilized in social surveys offer the institutionalization of data required by the 'context of justification', while staying responsive to those obscure and unexpected components that belongs to 'context of discovery' (Corbetta 2003: 269-270). This type of structured questionnaire would confine the likelihood of the answers acquired, along these lines ethnic minority poverty issue will be too inadequately comprehended to gather information through this strategy. The second interview structure, semi-structured interview may be the most well-known and most common of the three formats (Arksey and Knight 1999). Questions are normally specified, yet the interview is allowed to develop in a semi-structured format (May 2011; Corbetta 2003: 270). The unstructured interview includes the scientist having concern when directing the interviewer yet the interviewee is allowed to discuss the theme in their own particular manner (May 2011; Corbetta 2003: 271).

Deciding between these three sorts of interviews depends upon the research objectives and the attributes of the phenomenon being considered. As indicated by Gilbert (2008), a semi-structured interview methodology is more adaptable when a question is asked and replied, thus more data can be acquired through the interview procedure and the organized interview. Furthermore, a semi-structured interview is

typically more proficient (Arksey and Knight 1999), as it is less tedious, and does not require much time of interviewees. In order to empower poor ethnic individuals, who have low training level and inability to communicate in Vietnamese easily, the author decided to utilize the semi-structured interview to give them the chance to provide in-depth information. Besides, the unstructured interview may not uncover the data that the specialist needed to know. For the reasons for gathering colossal, in-depth data from the interviewees, inside the time asset for a PhD, long separations from the hands on work zone, the semi-structured interview was picked as a standout amongst the most proper interviews to embrace.

Another explanation behind utilizing semi-structured interviews was the answering capability of the interviewees. The vast majority of them are ethnic minorities, they do not speak Vietnamese fluently, therefore, not all interviewees had the capacity to depict their experience obviously. Besides, the educational level was low, this is not necessarily an issue of unwillingness to talk, but rather an inability to convey their experiences because may be they do not know what the specific research questions are. Thus, by using semi-structured interviews the interviewer had an opportunity to explain with interviewees about the questions and sometimes remind them what they had not yet spoken about. As Harding (2013: 22) notes, these interviews ‘provide an opportunity for researchers to listen to the views or experiences of one respondent for an extended period for time, to ask probing questions and to explore ideas further’. The author also chose semi-structured interviews to accumulate the data required because of the limitation of time and other resources. This study was exploratory in nature and the author needed to give interviewees the space to characterize their answers themselves without an over characterized organization in the response categories.

Interviews were conducted with local people, communes heads, villages heads, selected government and NGOs officials, and two experts about North West provinces in general, Son La in particular. These interviews were carried out

without a questionnaire, but based on interview guides prepared previously. After the interviews, the researcher needed to note down the information obtained during the day. These notes contained many things such as the interviewee's voice, facial and bodily expressions accompanying the statement, words, opinions, commune characteristics and other things. For the poor, the interview was aimed at gathering information related to poverty conditions in their community, their role in the local poverty reduction process and factors affecting the poverty reduction process as well as the assets that they were possessing. While for others such as province leaders, district leaders, commune and village leaders, NGOs and government officials, the interviews were intended to gather the information relating to policies, programmes and projects in the selected communes, their views of the poverty problem and the desired solutions.

All interviews began with some biographical and guiding questions. These questions covered specific topics. As I went on and picked up things said by interviewees and asked further questions that were not on this list. This would make the interviews flexible 'responding to the direction in which the interviewee takes the interview' (Bryman 2012: 174). The customs of ethnic minorities in Son La province are quite different to those in other parts of Vietnam, even other North West areas. When you have a cozy association with them, they will talk transparently. The author had lived in this area for 32 years and comprehended this element. Hence, to start the interviews with every participant, the author generally got some information about the life, family, day by day exercises, their relatives and traditions. Once in a while, the author did not set up the guide composing inquiries, furthermore, did not utilize the advanced recorder. The author took notes and later recreated the valuable discussions from memory, keeping in mind the end goal to chat with participants in a natural context. With the province and districts officers, the interviews that took place during the office hours and were often interrupted by people coming in and out. Three particular interviews took the author three and half hours because the interviewees were constantly being interrupted by the people

coming in and out the of the office and telephone calls for various reasons. As previously mentioned, the author conducted over sixty interviews but only twenty eight face to face effective interviews were chosen for analysis of this study, 20 of which are with ethnic minority residents, 5 with Son La province officers at different levels (province, district and commune), 1 with NGOs officer, 2 with experts of North West mountainous provinces in Vietnam. As for the participant observation, during the semi-structured interviews, the author had to be helped at least by an interpreter in each commune (*See picture 3*), who helped the author to translate from ethnic minority language to Vietnamese and got enough knowledge about the culture and customs of the residents.

The author started by investigating different national and provincial plans and reports on the social economy in recent years (most recent 5 years). Within 5 months, the author conducted the field research in Vietnam, mostly in five case studies in Son La province, including Phong Lai, Chieng Ngan, Chieng Hac, Nam Lau, Chieng Bom communes. The author completed over sixty semi-structured interviews, 5 focus groups discussions and direct observations with residents and civil assistants at different levels, including province, district and communes, two experts and researchers of North West mountainous province in Vietnam and one NGO official. At the same time, the researcher contacted a variety of Vietnamese scholars, colleagues in the form of informal or formal interviews, or by email to gain a broader understanding of the ethnic minority culture and customs from the daily activities to social change and the standard of living.



**Picture 4.3: The interpreter is a Thai Den woman from Nam Lau commune, Thuan Chau district**

*Source: Photos from fieldwork in Nam Lau commune, Thuan Chau District, January, 2014.*

#### *4.3.3.4 Focus group discussions*

Despite the fact that the procedure appeared in the form of a discussion, the focus group format permitted the specialists to confirm proclamation and elucidate the conclusions. It additionally gave the chance to the members to express their inclination and conclusions in their own words. The fact that individuals take into account pertinent information and thoughts to rise that would not have been examined or said in an individual interview. This technique additionally allows the scientist to take advantage of deeper levels of significance.

Focus group discussion (FGD) is a qualitative interview method which involves several participants usually with the same or similar experience on a topic of research. The FGD basically involves a small group of a population (Bhattacharjee 2012: 40; Maykut and Morehouse 2002: 103-107; Sarantakos 1993: 180-182; ,Brockington and Sullivan 2003: 58-62; Hay 2010: .84). This method aims at

collecting the missing data from previous conducted interviews and explores “the gap between what people say and what they do” (Martin and Flowerdew 2005: 131). According to Bhattacharjee (2012: 40) and Hay (2010: .84), focus groups refer to bringing in a small group of subjects (typically six to ten people) at one location and having them discuss a topic or issues defined by the researcher for a period of 1.5 to 2 hours. The number of the groups selected to represent a total population depends on a variety of factors in the field such as research aims, research scale and heterogeneity of the respondents (Hay 2010: 91). In this study, the focus group consisted of one group at Chieng Hac commune, two groups at Phong Lai commune, one at Chieng Ngan commune and one at Chieng Bom commune. Each group had 6 - 8 people. There were no strict rules adopted to select the participants in the group. As Babbie (2011: 303) pointed out, ‘participants in the focus groups are not likely to be chosen through a rigorous, probability sampling method’. This study selected the participants purposely based on the research aims and the participants experience of being poor and their participation in the poverty reduction process of the past. The people attending the FGD were different from those interviewed and were diverse in ethnic background, age, knowledge, experiences and position in their own community, and this diversity became an important point of discussion (Hay 2010: 158). The people selected were invited to a determined place, normally the centre house of the commune or the house of the commune leader (*See the picture 4*). At these places, they sat together around a circle table or in rows of chairs. The researcher acted as a facilitator, who introduced the topic for discussion, and invited as well as moderated the discussion until it was finished. The discussion was generally based on a structured interview guide designed by the researcher, which covered the main topics and problems that had been defined by the semi-structured interviews, conducted in order to get a detailed understanding on the key issues discussed. The FGDs were designed to build a holistic understanding of the problem situation based on participants’s comments and experiences. When a question was asked, anyone could raise their hand to answer and after that some other could comment on it. Every participant in the group was

encouraged to speak and give their opinions on the subject. The discussion took around two hours, including breaktime (Hay, 2010, p.161-162). In a final part of the focus group, each group was given a chance to produce a diagram regarding causes and effects of poverty, the impact of poverty policies, how to change and what outside resources they felt they needed to support them to solve their current problems. As with the interviews and the participant observations, during the focus group discussions, the author had to be supported by an interpreter, who helped the author to understand more about the culture and customs of the residents before the author started the discussion. He explained with the participants about the author's questions in his language and gave the author a deep understanding of their opinions by translating from ethnic minority language to Vietnamese.



**Picture 4.4: The focus group discussion with H'Mong group in the “culture house of the village” in Nam Giat village, Phong Lai commune, Thuan Chau district.**

*Source: Photos from fieldwork in Phong Lai commune, Thuan Chau District, June, 2013 (author included). (More pictures in the appendix 3)*

#### *4.3.3.5 Secondary data*

The second major type of data is secondary data, which relates to policies, programmes and projects. They were collected by interviews with selected institutions and library research. The selected institutions involved district communes and villages government offices, and NGOs. The library research included internet, books, written reports, journals and bulletins (Cavana et al. 2001: 54-56). This data was intended to examine poverty in general and poverty with ethnic minorities in particular from a macro level. This included the nature of poverty policy and the shift from a centralised to a decentralized approach, the ways in which poverty had been defined and how poverty policies related to ethnic minorities have been developed and executed in Vietnam in general and Son La province and ethnic minorities there in particular. With special reference to Son La province, it was expected to give an understanding of poverty, policies and programmes, government expenditure and institutions for ethnic minorities to reduce poverty in their community. During the fieldwork, the author collected a lot



of data from Son La's Statistics Office, Son La's People's Committee, the reports from many departments such as Son La's Department of Planning and Investment, Construction, Health, Education. Moreover, the reports from districts and commune levels over a number of years also were collected with the aim of obtaining a more comprehensive picture about the research topic. Data from these sources provided a historical perspective about communities development and poverty reduction efforts within ethnic minority communities in Son La province. From there, the author will have a more accurate approach for the processes of observations, interviews and focus group discussions later. The above data will be analyzed and illustrated in the next chapters. To sum up, the research employed a variety of techniques to gather enough data to understand poverty amongst ethnic minority communities in Son La province, what existing assets there were in these communes and how these assets could be applied to alleviate the poverty situation in Son La province in a sustainable manner.

#### ***4.3.4 Data analysis***

In reporting the discoveries of this research, lengthy citations and findings were utilized to contextualize the information by depicting the topics and issues that respondents felt were the most important. Although the author is aware of the inherent restrictions of a small-scale qualitative study of the type conducted here, it is suggested that the research and chosen methods offer and explore the ideological and professional implications of an asset-based approach from the perspective of those at the forefront of practice and policy development amongst ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

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The residents viewed access to information or anything happening in their commune and village, including poverty reduction programmes, socio-economic development plans and cultural festivals as the most important aspect of their participation (LR12; LR26; LR18; PGDs01; 02; 04). In addition, the leader of Phong

Lai commune also said that ‘information leads to the involvement effectiveness.’ In the contemporary democratic world, policy-making is an important process that involves various stakeholders including community members at local level. It means that, allowing local residents to have a voice in decision making is crucial for collective community development, including poverty reduction (Birkland 2014). As specified above, this study utilized a qualitative strategy basing on semi-structured interviews, participant observation and focus group discussion. Such information originated from ordinary people in Son La and gave them a voice in relation to the experience of poverty and poverty reduction.

After the taped semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were painstakingly deciphered, codes were utilized to recognize the significant subjects that rose up out of every interview or discussion. Despite some altering made to enhance comprehensibility, it was kept to a minimum to guarantee the credibility of the information. This procedure empowered the author to develop a legitimate and authentic argument. The author utilized the inductive way to deal with information examination because of thematic analysis, which is especially connected with introductive methodologies and involves recognizing themes emerging from the data (Harding 2013: .4). According to Lodico et al. (2010: 301), qualitative research data collection and examination are of inductive process. Inductive data analysis is opposite to the deductive data analysis (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 203-203; Maykut and Morehouse 2002: 126-127; Strauss 2001). Lincoln and Guba (1985: 202) characterized inductive data analysis as ‘a procedure for comprehending the field data which is gotten from interviews, perceptions, records, unpretentious measures, nonverbal prompts, or whatever other qualitative or quantitative data pools’. The fundamental motivation behind utilizing this approach is to give a sound and basic method for breaking down qualitative information for different research purposes. After reading the transcripts and drawing some key themes, such as the role of inhabitants in ethnic minorities in the poverty reduction process, the liverhood methodologies, systems of the ethnic minority, the views of policy-makers about

ethnic minority poverty, the role of government support and policies with the poverty reduction process for ethnic minorities in Son La province, the author found out that resources are existing inside the community. There are different softwares that are accessible for analyzing qualitative information, however the most commonly utilized is NVIVO. The author used NVIVO software to break down the information obtained. The software was extremely valuable to deal with the information.

#### **4.4. Challenges**

During the fieldwork in Vietnam, the author faced several difficulties. The first obstacle was the training level of interviewees. The author initially wanted to utilize a mixed-method technique approach utilizing both qualitative and quantitative tools for data collection and analysis, as according to Creswell (2014), such a mixed strategy design can exploit the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Yet, after one month of fieldwork (from May to June 2013), using detailed questionnaires with H'Mong and Thai Den inhabitants in Phong Lai commune, the author perceived that the education levels of most of participants, who are ethnic minorities, was too low. Some received answers did not provide the correct information. As a result, the author switched to utilize qualitative apparatuses for information collection and analysis. At the same time, the author utilized the presentation letter from the province's committee as a province government assistant. Hence, data given was mistaken because they thought that the author could help them - they addressed the interview questions in the direction that they are poor and need assistance. Consequently, in the second phase of the research (from September 2013 to January 2014), the author just demonstrated the introduction letter to the leader of communes or districts instead of all interviewees, then the leader introduced the author to them as a normal researcher, who had simply come to conduct an analysis of their community.

With regards to the focus group discussions, it was very difficult to choose a suitable time convenient for all participants in the group. There were many other obstacles to the collection of data overall, often connected to the social, economic and cultural situation of the participants and the geographical region in which they lived. Cancelled or failed appointments were common as were long distance travels for both interviewer and interviewee. Respondents could certainly be classed as hard to reach. Some interviews and FGDs took place late at night and the author had to stay there over night. A unique challenge was the low quality of the roads that serve residents in Son La. As previously mentioned, the first fieldwork was undertaken in the rainy season. Wherever it rained, the street rapidly became soft with mud, which often meant the researcher was unable to reach the interview/FGD place even by bicycle or motorbike. Also, it was challenging to move from place to place even by walking, as the ground became excessively elusive and sloppy. A further challenge was that the author was born, and experienced his childhood, in the Son La area. The field sites were very familiar to the author and he often had to ‘detach’ himself in order to view things as objectively as possible. However, while qualitative research is always inherently subjective to some extent, this familiarity simultaneously empowered the author when making connections with, and securing access to, interviewees and individuals for FGDs

A final challenge was the province data set. During the fieldwork process, even though the author had an introduction letter from the Central Government of Son La Province and Son La’s Construction Department, it was very hard to obtain basic information on every ethnic group in the province, even up-to-date data on the current population of all ethnic groups. This is partly because from the previous nationwide census in 2009, baseline demographic figures were very difficult to extrapolate. There was a distinct lack of data related to ethnic differences

#### ***4.4.1 Interpretation and translation***

As previously noted, interviewees within this project came from different communes with different ethnicities. Each ethnic group has its own language and does not use Vietnamese or English. For the purpose of communicating with non-Vietnamese and non-English speakers, an interpreter was employed. As the author had worked for the construction department as a government assistant in Son La province for more than 9 years before arriving in the UK., he selected two people from this department, who are ethnic minority people, to assist during the fieldwork period in Son La province. Their role was to help the author in taking notes during semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and to ensure that nothing was missed out. However, following the first fieldwork from May 2013 to July 2013, the author recognised that they could not understand all ethnic languages, so in the second phase of the fieldwork (from September, 2013 to end of January, 2014), the author used further assistants provided by the chosen commune or CEMA of Son La province. They not only helped the author to translate from ethnic minority languages to Vietnamese, and to understand the culture and customs of the residents, but also helped in checking for omissions in data or incorrect information. In addition, these assistants could provide guidance on people and the location of houses in the remote villages in the communes.

#### ***4.4.2 The study's limitations***

A major possible limitation of this research project which needs to be acknowledged relates to language. The researcher does not speak ethnic minority languages, therefore the information might have been re-interpreted or lost during translation from EM languages to Vietnamese and from Vietnamese to English. Also, as most of interviewees were poor with limited education, they had limited knowledge about the research topic. The author is also aware that different working relationships were formed with different local residents and with local government at different levels (province, district and commune). Some of participants may have perceived the author in the role of a friend, while others may have viewed him purely as a researcher. Although the author has attempted to mitigate any possible

bias in the findings linked to the nature of his relationship with the fellow residents, a note of caution should be made in placing the interactions with the interviewees as a possible factor in influencing the nature of the interview data in certain circumstances.

Thomas (2013: 150) notes, with regard to case study methodologies, that ‘there is no intimation in the case study that you will be generalizing from this case to others’. This study was restricted to five communes and therefore it would be potentially problematic to fully generalise the findings to represent all poverty reduction processes for ethnic minorities across the whole province. However, the findings are expected to encourage greater appreciation of how the poor viewed poverty, how they fought against it, what resources they had and how these can help ethnic minorities to reduce poverty – specifically how an ABCD approach can contribute to sustainable poverty reduction or not. Therefore, the research results will at least have relevance for understanding poverty and poverty reduction in Son La, and even in Vietnam generally, in terms of recognising general process of the poverty experience and sustainable poverty reduction. In addition, it is expected that the findings could inform government, NGOs and external support agency attempts to improve the targeting and effectiveness of poverty reduction policies for ethnic minorities, in Son La province particularly and more generally in Vietnam. Significantly, following completion of the research project and the thesis, the author will return to Son La province, Vietnam and continue work as a government assistant in the research area, thus the research results could help the author to build a suitable poverty reduction approach for ethnic minorities in Son La province.

Another constraint of this study was time resources. If more time was available, the scope and impact of the research could be enhanced. The group discussions and interviews covered, geographically, the main part of Son La province but not all of it, for complete generalization. During the time of collecting and analyzing the data,

the author realized the importance of government level experts and donors for the development process of poor communes in Son La province. In addition, more time is required to see the long-term implications of an ABCD approach and whether this is sustainable or not.

#### ***4.4.3 Ethical issues and challenges***

Ethical issues are a vital part of any research project. They are necessary at both professional level and at an administrative level (Schreier 2012; Kimmel 2007) and give precedence to participant protection and safety (Buckler and Walliman 2008). According to the ethical approval from the University of Northumbria at Newcastle, this research was defined as low risk. The fieldwork did not include numerous research collaborators. The study was helped by interpreters from the Province Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs and individuals from every commune and from Son La's Department of Construction, who guided the research within remote regions and provided local unique identification such as addresses or phone numbers. In addition, the interpreter assisted the author in explaining clearly the aim of the research to respondents and prepared the consent form which the respondents needed to read and sign before participating in the focus groups and interviews. Nevertheless, based on their culture and habits, some respondents decided to refuse to read and sign as they assumed it was too formal. They preferred an informal relationship with the researcher based upon the mutual trust with each other without any deception and pressure.

According to Babbie (2012: 62-74) , 'quite often, research subjects are asked to reveal deviant behaviour, attitudes they feel are unpopular, or personal characteristics that may seem demeaning, such as low income, the receipt of welfare payments. Revealing such information usually makes the subjects feel at least uncomfortable' and 'social research, moreover, often requires people to reveal personal information about themselves'. Therefore, in some points, the topic research seemed to deal with such personal attributes. To guard against

embarrassment in the fieldwork results and personal attributes, when conducting the focus groups discussion and interviews, the author paid much attention to this point by bringing them to initially discuss the problems they faced daily and how to deal with the problems. With long discussion, they felt that the discussion inspired them a lot, thereby feeling secure to continue to the next discussion point whose concern was about well-being, poverty, attention in poverty process and so on.

In this study, the information on the research project was provided enough to participants through both the briefing and an information sheet translated to Vietnamese. The author explained carefully about their involvement and their rights to withdraw or to refuse any sensitive questions. Participants were well-informed of all steps, content of all activities and times in which they participated. The author also shared the schedule of observation actions with them and asked them to allow the author to observe their daily lives and visit their field and houses. According to Harding (2013: 3) 'confidentiality is normally a key ethical requirement of any research project' so participant numbers rather than names were used when interpreting and writing the thesis, to ensure anonymity of respondents and confidentiality of data. As the case studies were conducted in rural areas, most interviewees lacked strong literacy skills and others were illiterate. Consequently, the utilization of verbal consents was made to the members at the beginning of the interview to guarantee confidentiality.

The procedure for conducting interviews and FGDs was carefully explained to all participants. Before conducting the interviews or FGDs, I had to clarify that even though I was a government assistant in the province before I went to UK and started my research, the research was my own individual research required for the fulfilment of my PhD thesis and did not relate to my former position and that I only hope that this study can assist my colleagues, who are policy-makers in the province in building the next policies in order to reduce poverty for ethnic minorities in a sustainable manner. The results of this research could be meaningful enough to



bring about prominent change to poverty in Son La.

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the methods that the author used to collect data for this research project. This research used qualitative methods, including focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. In addition, the chapter has also discussed the relationship between the interviewer and interviewees. The rationale for selecting the case study approach was discussed thoroughly. The selection of five communes in three districts as case studies has also been clearly explained. The author also explained the full fieldwork process, beginning from preparation in the UK to the process of data collection over six months in Vietnam, specifically in Son La province. As stated earlier, the purpose of this research is to understand more about poverty reduction amongst ethnic minorities in Son La province and how relevant an asset-based approach might be to improve the quality of life and sustainably reduce poverty amongst ethnic minority communities in Son La. We now turn to the main, core, data results sections of the thesis.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THE OVERALL PICTURE OF POVERTY IN SON LA PROVINCE**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, over the past ten years Son La has become one of the fastest developing provinces in the North West area of Vietnam with a high economic growth rate. The province has also achieved impressive results in poverty reduction. However, poverty incidence in this area still continues to be placed in the worst status in the country. Similar to other regions of Vietnam, the poverty reduction progress in Son La has been steady in recent years (Table 5.1). But the problem is that such results have not achieved the necessary sustainability when there are still so many near-poor households, who are living above but very close to the poverty threshold and ‘willing’ to fall back into poverty if they meet any vulnerable issues. Particularly, it is notable that from 2012 onwards, almost 100 per cent of the poor households in Son La are ethnic minority groups. Therefore, poverty reduction, particularly for ethnic minority groups, has been one of the most important political tasks and leading tasks in the socio-economic development plans of Son La province for many years. This chapter will illustrate the results of my research, which examines the situation of poverty, as well as the trend and status of the poverty reduction process in recent years, with a focus on the period 2011-2014, especially poverty reduction for ethnic minority groups because they account for more than 83 per cent of the Son La population (LISASL 2015: 4). ‘Ethnic minority poverty presents a particular and persistent challenge for Vietnam’ (Worldbank 2013).

This chapter opens with the statistical data that reveals the general trend of poverty in Son La in the last few years. It then looks into the different key characteristics of poverty in the province through the five chosen case studies. Each component is further categorised and explained in detail. The original research questions, ‘what

are the main characteristics of poverty in Son La province ?’ and ‘how is the poverty reduction process currently occurring in Son La province ?’, especially with reference to ethnic minority groups, will be answered. Importantly, this chapter and the two following chapters (chapters six and seven), will report the themes from the analysis of data collected in the five chosen communes from Son La province through the qualitative multiple-case study method discussed in chapter 4.

### 5.1. Overall picture of poverty in Son La province

The recent research by Thanh (2014: 1) and my primary research through focus group discussions in Nam Giat village, Phong Lai commune (FGD01), Ta So 1 village in Chieng Hac commune (FGD04) and in Nam Lau commune (FGD03) have all found that over the last decade the lives of poor people in Son La province have been improved with better infrastructure, easier access to health care service and education, by virtue of the implementation of poverty reduction programmes. However, the improvement is far from adequate to completely alleviate poverty amongst people, especially the ethnic minority population. The most frequent feedback from respondents about the poverty reduction projects is that there are so many inadequate instructions from government that they could not understand and adopt the mechanisms which partly results from the shortage of qualified staff at district level for instructions.

**Table 5.1: Poverty rates of the District in Son La province for the period 2014-2017  
(in percentage)**

<b>Location</b>	<b>2014</b>		<b>2015</b>		<b>2016</b>		<b>2017</b>	
	<b>Poor House holds</b>	<b>Near-poor House holds</b>	<b>Poor House holds</b>	<b>Near-poor House holds</b>	<b>Poor House holds</b>	<b>Near-poor House holds</b>	<b>Poor House holds</b>	<b>Near-poor House holds</b>
<b>Son La City</b>	1.2	1	1.72	1	1.5	0.96	1.18	0.67

Location	2014		2015		2016		2017	
	Poor House holds	Near-poor House holds	Poor House holds	Near-poor House holds	Poor House holds	Near-poor House holds	Poor House holds	Near-poor House holds
Quynh Nhai District	22.7	14.6	24.9	11.4	20.5	12.18	19.8	12
Thuan Chau District	29.4	21.5	48.96	15.24	48.1	16.18	45.03	18.67
Muong La District	33.8	9.88	54.98	10.41	48.26	12.44	43.42	12.23
Mai Son District	17.99	5.91	25.54	6.4	24.61	6.48	21.35	7.17
Yen Chau District	28.3	6.53	42.51	6.9	43.17	6.83	39.28	7.58
Moc Chau District	13.07	6.41	14.65	5.47	12.77	6.71	10.43	6.25
Van Ho District	53.73	11.21	50.87	8.52	46.83	9.03	44.14	8.45
Bac Yen District	29.6	12.7	39.59	9.73	37.19	18.72	33.58	19.52
Phu Yen District	20.4	29.19	29.91	17.2	25.4	17.29	23.83	16.24
Song Ma District	26.42	10.3	45.52	8	41.83	12.91	38.83	12.9
Sop Cop District	36.96	5.26	50.55	10.34	45.85	14.98	42.08	15.61
<b>Whole province</b>	<b>23.9</b>		<b>34.34</b>		<b>31.91</b>		<b>29.22</b>	
The whole province changes compared to previous year			+10.44		-2.43		-2.69	

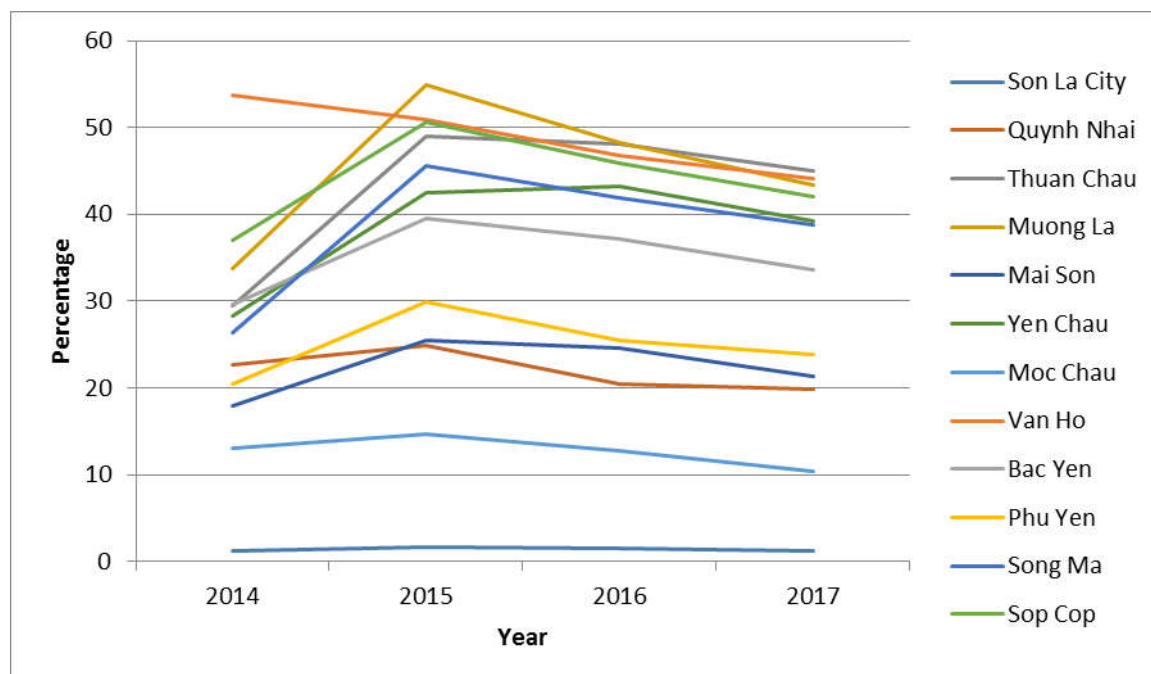
*Sources: Based on the annual reports of socio-economic development of the districts and*

*provinces level in Son La province in the year 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> From 2015, the poverty rate was multidimension results

**Figure 5.1: Progress at reducing poverty rate in the 12 districts of Son La province in the period 2014-2017 (in percentage)**

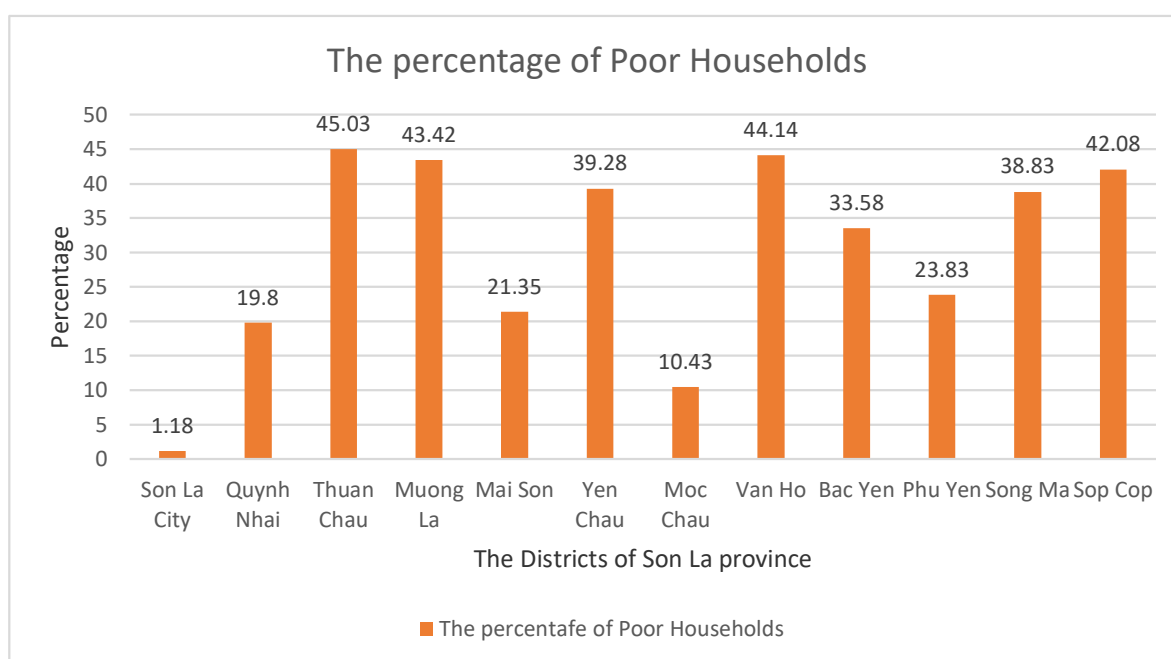


*Sources: The figure is drawn based on the reports of Son La People's Committee for the period 2014-2017 (UBND, 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2014; LISASL, 2015)*

At first, the table and diagram above illustrate the general trend of poverty reduction in Son La province for the period 2014-2017. The poverty rates have witnessed a gradual decrease at a rate of almost 3 per cent every year while the number of poor households has reduced by 5, 200 annually (UBND 2017c; 2017b), almost doubling the average of the national poverty reduction pace. These figures have also been supported by the interviewees in the research and the formal evaluations in the socio-economic development reports of local government that poverty in the whole province has been better controlled recently (LR05; PO03). More specifically, the poverty rate has reduced steadily from 34.34 per cent in 2015 to 31.91 per cent in 2016 (Table 5.1) (LISASL 2017). However, the number of poor and near-poor households in Son La is still at a high level with 62, 642 (24% of total population) and 30, 817

(above 11% of total population) households, respectively (UBND 2018c; SL 2018). But there are clear intra-provincial differences in poverty status, particularly according to (1) place of residence (urban or rural) and (2) ethnicity (table 5.1; table 5.2 and figure 5.1, 5.2, 5.3). According to decentralized administration level, there still are 76 communes with 1,076 villages in extremely difficult situations. In short, the figure above indicates that the poverty reduction process is still a big challenge for the leaders of the province in the future. *'In our commune, the poor households have considerably decreased overall, the proportion of households, who is "short of food", also no longer exist since last year. The households "short of food" were very popular in our commune in the last five year, especially in the period from February to April' (LR07).*

**Figure 5.2: Distribution of poverty over districts of Son La province in 2017**



*(Source: Own calculation, based on the data from the reports of LISA (LISASL, 2018))*

Uneven distribution is the general characteristic of poverty in Son La province,

which can be seen in Figure 5.2 - Distribution of poverty over districts of Son La province in 2017. While Son La City only experienced a poverty rate of 1.18%, other districts showed a much higher rate, such as 10.43% in Moc Chau district, almost 42.08% in Sop Cop district and in Thuan Chau district there are still 45.03% of population living under the poverty threshold. During the last few years, the reported rural poverty rate has remained more-or-less static in some districts. The reasons for these differences are not fully apparent and further research is needed to assess their significance.

It is not only the extent of poverty but the pace of poverty reduction that also differs from district to district in the province. According to the figure 5.1, while Van Ho, Yen Chau, Song Ma districts have declined by only 6.9%, 9.3% and 17.8%, respectively, other districts have decreased around 30% to 40% of incidence of households, with over 50% in Moc Chau and Son La city. This can be explained by the following reasons. Firstly, the faster reduction pace in five districts including Quynh Nhai, Sop Cop, Bac Yen, Phu Yen and Muong La is the result of support from programme 30a for the 62 poorest districts and the national Target Programme on Sustainable Poverty reduction 2014-2017 (Appendix 2). According to the official report of SLPC (UBND 2018c: 4), only programme 30a had invested VND 866, 56 million (around 29 million GBP) for the five above poorest districts for the period 2014-2017. Secondly, although not in the list of the poorest districts to receive support from programme 30a, Son La city and Moc Chau district are located along with No.6 national road, which provides them with more chances for better transportation and infrastructure, production support services, markets and social services (PO03, PO05, EP02). The third reason for slower poverty reduction is the dependence of residents on agricultural production as in the case of Sop Cop where 100% of the poor household livelihood is based on agriculture such as corn and rice cultivation. Fourthly, in an attempt to reduce the incidence of poverty at a high and sustainable pace, various numbers of programmes have been implemented during the last ten years, specifically designed to assist the poorest communes and the



remote and mountainous areas (Hung. et al. 2011; Tung et al. 2013; Ninh, 2014). According to the investigation of Son La's Department of Planning and Investment, currently Son La has a total of 58 programmes, projects and policies which directly support the poverty reduction of ethnic minorities and the poorest communes. Most of all beneficiaries are concentrated in the poor ethnicities in remote areas in terms of education, infrastructure, health and sanitation. Sharing with the whole figure of the country, Son La also has benefited from the national target programmes, according to the official reports from SLPC (UBND 2018). Resolution 30a/2008/NQ-CP entailed the investment of VND 182, 26 million (6 million GBP) in the year 2017, for the five poorest districts - Quynh Nhai, Muong La, Sop Cop, Bac Yen and Phu Yen.

In terms of the five chosen communes for the case studies which form the basis of this research project - Phong Lai, Chieng Hac, Chieng Ngan, Chieng Bom and Nam Lau - it can be argued that these communes have shared a similar situation to other districts of Son La province. Generally, all communes have experienced an improvement in poverty reduction over the recent period, with the poverty rate gradually decreasing.

**Table 5.2: Poverty rate in 5 chosen communes for the period 2014-2017**

<b>Commune</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
Phong Lai	18.7%	34.2%	33.6%	28.33%
Chieng Hac	26.9 %	36.8 %	35.2 %	31a.1 %
Chieng Ngan	5.3%	15.5%	15.1%	13.99%
Chieng Bom	42.8%	62.7%	61.2%	57.4%

Nam Lau	39.18%	57.6%	53.3%	49.31%
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Source: The reports of chosen communes in socio-economic development 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017(Bau, 2015, 2016;, 2017;, Thang, 2015;, 2016;, 2017;, Tinh, 2015;, 2016;, 2017;, Duong, 2015;, 2016;, 2017).

As reported by key officials of the chosen communes in our research project, who have the best understanding of local situations, poverty is not evenly spread among ethnic groups within each commune (SC04, SC05, SC06). Specifically, in Chieng Bom and Chieng Ngan commune, the highest poverty rate has been seen in the Thai Den group; whereas in Chieng Hac, H'Mong and Muong, rather than Thai Den, is the poorest group. Collectively, in all five communes, H'Mong group has possessed the highest poor household rate and also suffered the highest cost of poverty reduction (SC03, SC04, LR13). As a common phenomenon, Kinh (Vietnamese) groups have enjoyed the lower poverty rate compared with other ethnic minorities, not only in Son La but also in the whole territory of Vietnam. This fact is confirmed in the socio-economic development reports of 2017, where Kinh people were not nominated in the poverty household list in Chieng Bom, Chieng Ngan, Chieng Hac and Nam Lau communes and there were only a few in Phong Lai commune (LO06, PO 03, LO02 and FGDs1, FGDs2). Even in the same commune, poverty is not even among villages, often concentrating in remote villages such as Ta So 1, Ta so 2 villages in Chieng Hac commune, Lai Bay in Phong Lai commune and Nam Tron village in Chieng Ngan commune.

The most striking characteristic of poverty in Son La province in general and the five communes in particular is the low living standard and the lack of infrastructure. Most of the residents in this area are living in semi-permanent or temporary houses and do not possess nationally standard consumer products, such as a TV, radio, motorbike, electric cooker or refrigerator. It is not surprising that only a few respondents said they are satisfied with their current living standards. It is those who reside in villages in the furthest areas, such as in Nam Tron village in Chieng

Ngan commune, Huoi Gieng village in Phong Lai; Ta So 1, Ta So 2 in Chieng Hac commune, who have been particularly suffering due to lack of roads and transportation, which limits their mobility and access to services and markets, one of the key factors of their poverty.

Lack of education and language problems were also specified as significant in relation to poverty within our research:

*In some remote villages such as: Pha Lao, Lai Bay, Huoi Gieng, some ethnic minorities, especially old women, cannot speak Vietnamese and they are also illiterate. Therefore they cannot participate in the market network, utilizing the public services or accessing market information (CO05)*

Furthermore, those who speak no or little Vietnamese are consistently poorer than those who do speak the majority language (Vietnamese) (CO04). The shortage of educational infrastructure is also a pressing problem for ethnic minority children in accessing school:

*In remote villages, households are living in the communities with dirt roads, where some households even have not got electricity. Primary school is the only school for all children from 6 to 10 with only one teacher who teaches 4 grades at the same time ('Lớp học cắm bản' in Vietnamese) (PO03).*



**Figure 5.3: The ‘Lớp học cắm bản’ in the E Tong commune, Thuan Chau district, Son La province**

To summarize, although Son La has achieved certain achievements in the poverty reduction process, there remain some important aspects to be completed. According to recent estimates from the LISASL and the information from the reports of SLPC, there remains one district (Van Ho) where more than half of population live under the poverty line and there are a huge number of the communes in the province where more than 60 per cent of the population still live under poverty conditions, such as Muong Bam and Phong Lap in Thuan Chau, Chieng An, Chieng Muon in Muong La and Na Ot in Mai Son (LISASL 2017). Therefore, the poverty reduction process still faces many challenges ahead. The following sections will illustrate the above arguments in further detail.

## **5.2. The key characteristics of poverty in the chosen sites**

### ***5.2.1. Perceptions of local residents of poverty and poverty reduction***

The understanding of how local residents are aware of poverty, its causes and the poverty reduction process is one of the important purposes of this research. It is clear that the perceptions of locals have changed over the time, as one representative put it:

*In the past, we had thought that poverty was synonymous with famine, therefore a poor household was a family which had nothing, neither money nor goods. Because most of people in the village were in the same situation thus they could not borrow from each other.*

But now,

*The poor households are almost not hungry...  
on the whole, the current poor households are less difficult than the poor in the past.*

There are now more chances for poor households to borrow from neighbours or relatives in case of necessity. Furthermore, there has been a change in the assessment to nominate a household as 'poor'. According to a head of village:

*Previously, when the government had not set the poverty threshold, we visited every family in the village and together analysed ourselves the situation of each family. There was a list of criteria to be met for a poor household. Based on other villagers' personal observation, all of households will be voted for the 'poor' status. And if one family achieved more than 80 per cent of votes, they would be considered as a poor household.*

At the moment, by virtue of the government threshold on poverty, it is said that it is easier for villages to determine whether a household is poor or not.

However, our research shows that there is still a gap between the most updated approaches on poverty of the governmental officers and residents. Governmental officers often answered that they consider ‘poverty’ and ‘poverty reduction’ as a multi-dimensional concept, whereas the majority of local residents and several commune officers still think of it in terms of the monetary dimension. This result is also in line with the findings of other recent researches on poverty reduction for ethnic minorities, and also consistent with the growing concern on human development and life quality in Vietnam generally (Dang 2012; Wells-Dang 2012; UKAid et al. 2012; Hung. et al. 2010).

According to an interview with one commune leader:

*Last few years, the Communist Party leaders and the Government have a different perception on poverty reduction. The leaders of our province also follow this trend. That is Multi-dimensional Poverty. Poverty should be no longer understood as having enough food and clothes. Now, we are considering to reduce poverty in terms of education, awareness, healthcare, infrastructure, culture, production, entertainment and so on.*

Nevertheless, we can discern a gradual change in the local residents’ perception on poverty and poverty reduction towards the direction of the multi-dimensional concept. This can be illustrated by the answers of two participants, who are living in the most difficult villages of the chosen sites, but shared the same thinking (LR27; LR36):

*The fact that you have a motorbike and television, or even a permanent house, does not mean that you are not in poverty. You need much more things. To me, I am not poor when I am no longer in debt, my house is fully equipped with television, fridge, motorbike... and I can afford to pay when I am ill (LR12).*

*My family can now afford to pay for my children's education and buy some assets and household facilities. Escaping from poverty means that I can invest in the green tea and coffee field, fish ponds for aquaculture development and have some stable jobs (LR02).*



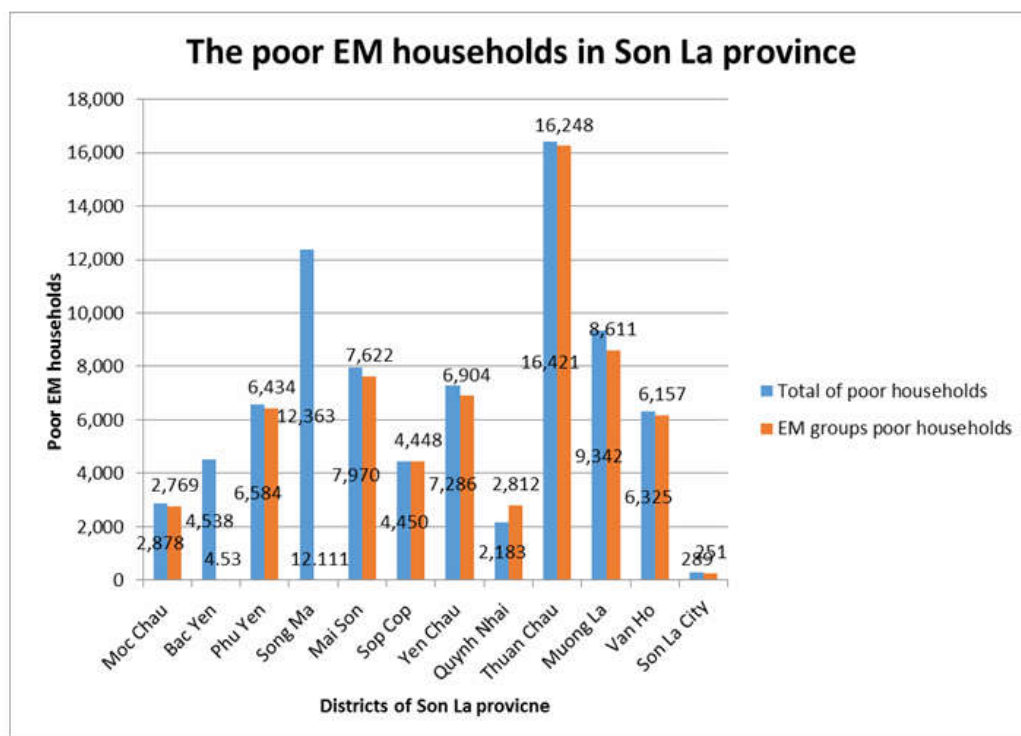
### 5.2.2. Poverty as a prevalent phenomenon amongst ethnic minorities

One of the most notable characteristics of the poverty in Son La province is that almost 100 per cent of poor households there are ethnic minority, only a few of them are Kinh people, according to official statistics from SLPC (SLPPC, 2017) (Table 5.3).

**Table 5.3: The percentage of ethnic minority households in districts in Son La province in 2017 (%)**

Location	Total			
	Total of poor households	% in total of population	EM Households	% in total of poor households
Moc Chau District	2,878	10.43	2,769	96.21
Bac Yen District	4,538	33.58	4,530	99.82
Phu Yen District	6,584	23.83	6,434	97.72
Song Ma District	12,363	38.8	12,111	98.0
Mai Son District	7,970	21.35	7,622	95.63
Sop Cop District	4,450	42.08	4,448	99.96
Yen Chau District	7,286	39.28	6,904	94.76
Quynh Nhai District	2,183	19.8	2,812	100
Thuan Chau District	16,421	45.03	16,248	98.95
Muong La District	9,342	43.42	8,611	92.18
Van Ho District	6,325	44.14	6,157	97
Son La City	289	1.18	251	87
<b>Whole province</b>	<b>81,260</b>	<b>29.22</b>	<b>78,897</b>	<b>97.09</b>

Sources: The reports on the socio-economic of Son La province 2017 of Son La People's Committee (UBND 2018a)



**Figure 5.4: The ethnic minority poor households as a share of total poor households in the Son La province in 2017**

(Sources: The reports on the socio-economic of Son La province 2017 of Son La People's Committee (UBND 2018a))

Table 5.3 and figure 5.4 show that 78, 897 of 81, 260 poor households in the whole province are ethnic minority, constituting 97.09%. This is also true of the number of the near-poor households (UBND 2015a) with 98.3% of near-poor households being ethnic minority. This fact is also shared by many experts and leaders of the communes and districts (LD02; LD04; PO03; PO 01; LD03: SC 06; SC 04; SC03). And the common idea is that *'this fact clearly affects the effort of reducing poverty incidence of the whole political system'* (PO03). To be more specific, the most miserable group is Thai Den, followed by H'mong and Muong in accordance with our investigation through observation of the daily life of local families during fieldwork, as well as our formal conversations with key stakeholders in the communes (FGDs 01).

H'Mong group is the majority part in the 'pockets' and 'hard cores' of poverty (*"nghèo cùng cực"*). Some interviewees even think that *'persistent poverty is a common phenomenon in H'Mong groups'* (PO02; PO03; EP02).

Within the five chosen communes, ethnic minority groups are also the major part of poor households. Only Phong Lai commune has some Kinh poor households. Although the poverty rate and the number of poor households have both gradually decreased in the whole province, the number of ethnic minority poor households have increased in some communes such as in Na Ot and Phieng Cam in Mai Son district, where there are still over 72 per cent of the whole population living under poor conditions; and of course, 100 per cent are ethnic minority (UBND 2015a) PO03; LR35; LR16). In addition, poverty is not evenly spread between ethnic groups within the same communes and districts. This is clearly illustrated in Phong Lai commune, where over 80 per cent of H'Mong households live around the poverty threshold. This figure is only around 40 per cent for the Thai Den group (LD04; SC06).

The reasons for the prevalence of poverty amongst ethnic minorities can be related to two major factors. Firstly, it derives from the low education of ethnic groups. In our observations and conversations with Kinh officers, it may be safely said that ethnic minorities are frequently considered as less developed, *'they have low education, are not aware of their right in the progress'* (PO02), they are seen as more 'backward' and less 'civilized' than Hoa and Kinh groups (LR28; LR16; PO02; CO07). Due to this lack of knowledge, ethnic people could find it harder to cultivate their living standard, they have less innovation, less improvement in production, less chance to achieve, especially when compared with Kinh group. As a result, they are often plunged into poverty. The second factor is the negative perception of ethnic minorities from provincial and district officers. Kinh officers often under-evaluate ethnic minority people, they may feel that it is a waste to pour support into ethnic minority groups because rarely can they take advantage of

resources in an effective manner. Additionally, as ethnic people have their own languages, the majority of them are not able to understand the instructions from the governmental officers. Simultaneously, while being portrayed as being ‘backward’, ethnic minority groups tend to limit their participation in poverty reduction and the mainstream society. This may also incline authorities and officials not to listen to, or respond to them. There is thus, generally, a lack of consideration of the important role that ethnic minorities can play within society, as well as in the poverty reduction progress. Overall, poverty reduction efforts should be implemented only after thorough consideration and communication with ethnic groups, with the purpose of finding the best way to alleviate poverty in their society.

### ***5.2.3. Poor people remain passive and dependent upon government support***

There is a common perception that those living in poverty in poor areas are passive and depend upon government support. The researcher has perceived this fact during several phases of fieldwork in Son La province. When conducting the first fieldwork in Phong Lai and Chieng Bom communes in June 2013, and then rechecking in May 2018, the researcher was introduced to the leaders of the communes as a provincial officer along with an introduction letter from the central provincial government. Considering the researcher as a central government person, interviewees tried to show their poor living conditions and called for a help from the government:

*Let see my house, we have not got any valuable furniture except a bike, thus we cannot escape from poverty without support from the government (LR09).*

This fact was then shared by the researcher and some of provincial officers of Son La; however the solution for the problem is still an open question:

*Communities in such situation feel that the government must take the main responsibility of investing in education, infrastructure and help them escape from the poverty and hunger, however the government is either unable or unwilling to give them a hand (PO03).*

One of the provincial officers commented:

*They thought that you are a governmental officer, hence you came to their village in order to help them or give them new support such as a new project of infrastructure or a project on planting seeds for next crop.*

Nevertheless, when returning to the same communes, but different villages in late 2013 for other fieldwork, the researcher changed the way to introduce himself, just as a researcher to collect data for a research project; and the attitude of interviewees changed obviously. In this manner, the reality of their lives has been brought to light. After two days living in a local household, local people became more friendly with the researcher and willing to share their real life. They are indeed poor, but not as poor as they tried to express in the previous fieldwork:

*We have a garden, if we work hard, we can provide food for our family. In addition, we can earn extra income by paid employment from other farms such as tea picking, corn harvesting. We will be paid VND 100, 000 to 200, 000 per person per day depending on job (3-6 GBP). This amount of money can meet the basic needs of our lives if we work hard (LR07).*

In all five chosen communes, with some questions about their current situation such as: *How do you think about your current situation ?*, or *could you tell me about the experience of escaping from poverty ?*, all of the local people would answer that they are *'poor'*, and none of them thought that they were *'left out of poverty'*.

So, why do they pretend to be the poor ? The reason is that if they admitted that they were not in poverty, they would not be able to receive a huge number of direct support for poor households from the government, such as subsidised health insurance cards, concession loans through the Social Policy Bank, financial allowances and food subsidies every month for nursery, primary and secondary school children in especially difficult communes, or even cash in some disadvantaged areas. This view is widely confirmed by most of the local residents during interviews and FGDs, as well as specialists of a range of provincial departments (PO04; PO05; PO06; LO02) and their leaders (DO01; SC05).

A poor head of household in Chieng Bom commune has firmly and repeatedly asserted that he wished he could remain poor:

*Since last year our family was left out of the list of poor households. Compared to some households in that list, the life of our family is more difficult, we are still "short of food" monthly. Hence, if not being considered as a poor household, we could not afford the school fee for children. I plan to take the kids out of school from next year' (LR23).*

The above family is typical of a group of people who still have the mentality to be poor. While he insisted his poor condition, many other residents and leaders in the commune did not agree with him. They thought that his family had a much better condition than others in his village and commune and therefore they removed his family from the poor household list (LR25; SC05). Many local people in poor areas of Vietnam nowadays feel 'proud' to be classified as 'poor' instead of feeling ashamed as in the past. They can even fight against each other and against governmental officers to be ranked as 'poor' and put on the poor household list. Of course, recognizing such a situation, local officials always try to persuade them not to do so. However, the attitude of passivity has been deep-rooted in local people's mindset for many years and it is difficult to alleviate. There does even exist the case

that someone who possesses land for rent still asks the government for support for the electricity cost. The fact that local people exploit the criteria to be recognized as a 'poor household' has become common. (Son 2015).

The above passive attitude of the poor is not only shown during the implementation of programmes, but also in public opinion polls to design and revise the policies and programmes more suitable for locals:

*We have no idea of the new policy. Let commune and district cadres decide. They have many experiences in implementing the same programmes in different places, therefore they can design the best policies for us and they know what we need (LR32).*

*In group or commune meetings the poor people (households) are often observers, never giving any comments because they are not good at speaking in Vietnamese and they worry that they are unable to explain their statement clearly. They also think that they have a lower level of education compared with programme officers, meaning that they cannot talk anything better than them (PO03).*

On the other hand, some interviewees mentioned that their opinions are ignored, the cadres just came to ask them but their comments were not considered in the updated policies:

*We did express a lot of our opinions but the commune and district officers ignored us, whereas wealthier people said the same thing and they were listened to and asked the follow-up questions. Now I still attend the policy discussion but never say anything.*

At the national level, Mrs. Pham Thi Hai Chuyen, Minister of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, also acknowledged that *'the poor, particularly ethnic minority groups, heavily depend on the "poverty support policies"'. The reason is that these policies mainly provide direct support in terms of land, education, medical insurance, loan, etc instead of vocational training. Recently, there are only a few job training policies for the poor'*.

It can be argued that granting poor people full subsidies is never an effective approach because it often creates a 'dependence attitude' among local residents. It is often better to spend that money on vocational or technical training. When poor residents accumulate enough knowledge and skills, they can find it easier to escape from poverty by themselves and in a sustainable manner. If they are fortunate, they may no longer turn back to the poor situation. The training project in Phong Lai commune is an excellent example. Thanh Thai Company partly supported the cost of chicken breed while local residents bore responsibility for the rest of the costs, i.e. preparing the chicken pens, collecting food and they received many different technical training sessions at all stages of the process of raising chickens. Thanh Thai Company sent the expert of poultry to deliver the training sessions for all participants. And now, many of them have escaped from poverty and have sustained this for a number of years. Only one household fell back into poverty.

However, even when many Kinh<sup>4</sup> officials deeply acknowledge that the ethnic groups are often referred as 'passive' and 'dependent on the assistance from poverty reduction programmes and policies from central government, the above assistances are still often delivered in a way of bestowing a favour. This more and more contributes to such passivity (PO03; SC02; SC07; EP02). Recently there have been many policies which provide direct assistance to the poor in all aspects such as improving living conditions and production (Decision No.102), education (Decision No.49), housing assistance (Decision No.167), health care programmes to grant health insurance cards, programmes to support seed and animal breeding, to name just a few. But the more the poor people take these benefits for granted, the more

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<sup>4</sup> Majority group



dependent and passive on government support they become:

*The more the government continues to subsidise poor households in terms of money transfers, cattle, food staple, the more poor people will depend on supports from government, the longer poverty will occur and the number of poor households will increase. All of the residents in our commune want to be in the poor household list to receive the support from poverty reduction policies and programmes of the government. When they are in the list, their children do not need to pay a tuition fee. There are two households who were classified as poor households based on the village vote fifteen years ago. Some other villagers even said that they did not have anything, and everything in their house belongs to their parents, hence they are poor. Alternatively, some young couples split up from their parents for the only purpose of becoming a poor household. One solution for this problem is that subsidy approach should be replaced by an incentive system. For example, supports should be given to the hardworking households or someone who has the initiative to improve the living condition of the community, etc. Poverty cannot exist if all of poor households work hard and support each other to improve their living conditions' (SC07).*

In short, households who are on the poor list of the commune could enjoy diverse types of assistance through the poverty reduction policies and programmes including health insurance cards, incentive loans, financial allowance and food subsidies and tuition fees. They are even happy to receive money and food on special occasions such as New Year, national Independence Day or H'Mong New Year<sup>5</sup>. Support does not come to households who are not on the list, they receive nothing. This fact has actually created many negative problems.

#### **5.2.4. Risk of falling back into poverty of ethnic minority groups**

One of failures of the poverty reduction effort is the phenomenon of falling back

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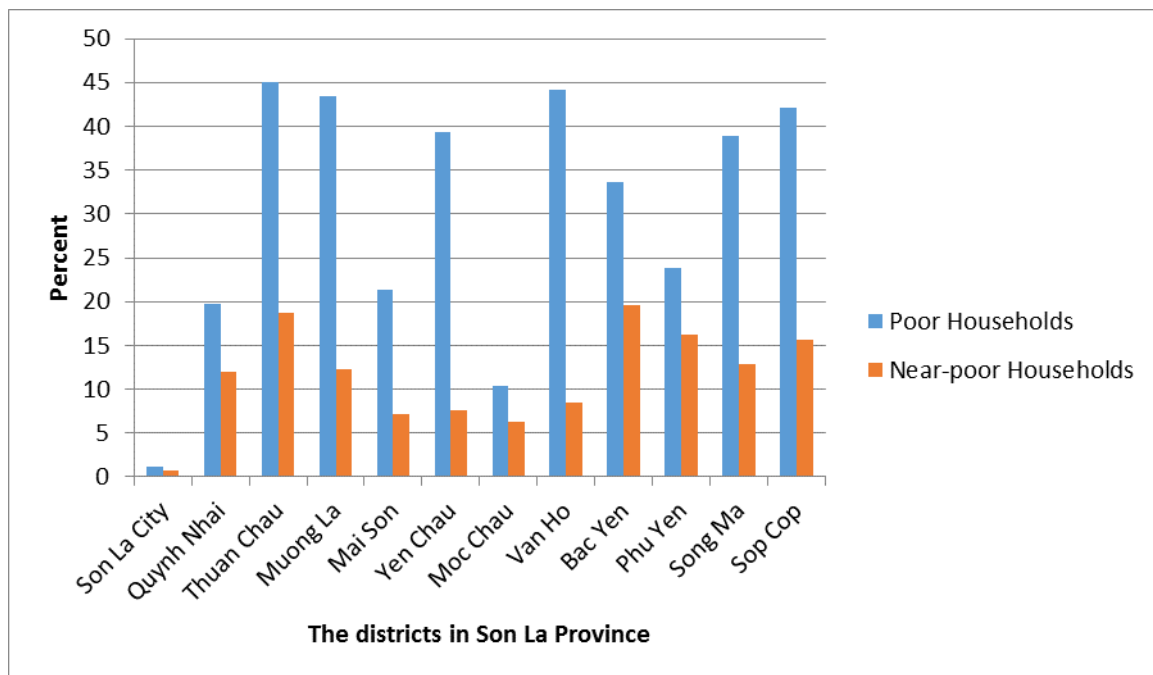
<sup>5</sup>The H'Mong ethnic minority group has their own NewYear celebration, normally at the end of December.

into poverty. According to Dr. Anh (2015), the director of the Institute of Sociology of Vietnam, in fact, many poor households who escaped from poverty have been still living near the poverty threshold. There are a huge number of *'near-poor'* households. The statistics shows that, on average, one out of every three households escaping from poverty falls back into poverty every year<sup>6</sup> (Cuong and Tung 2014). To be more specific, one third of the poor households in 2017 were the households that escaped from poverty and became non-poor ones in 2013. In Son La, we share the same figure, particularly in the ethnic minority group (PO07). The main reason is that the above groups usually live in areas with difficult natural conditions (for example, mountainous topography) and often suffer from natural disasters such as droughts and floods. Therefore, it is more difficult to accomplish the goal of poverty reduction in these areas. Besides, the households, who have just escaped from poverty and continued to live near the poverty threshold, are not fully aware of their situation and do not have oriented production plans to stabilize their livelihood. More specifically, according to the new criteria, a near-poor household has income of only between 100 and 130 per cent of the poverty threshold in each period (Dung 2011), meaning that each person living in the near-poor condition has an average income of between VND 400,000 and VND 520,000 (13 to 15 GBP) per month. Table 5.1 indicates that according to the new poverty threshold for multidimensional measurement (2014 according to the poverty threshold of the 2011-2015 period), the incidence of near-poor households at the end of 2017 in Son La was 11.23 per cent, still very high.

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<sup>6</sup>The Center of National Information and Socio- economic Forecast of Vietnam (2014, P.7)

**Figure 5.5: Poor and near-poor households in Son La 2014 (in %)**



(Sources: Author calculated based on the reports of SLPC for the period 2014-2017 (Son La People's Committee, 2017; UBND, 2017a; UBND, 2017b; UBND, 2017; UBND, 2017d; UBND, 2017e; SLSO, 2016; LISASL, 2017)

The diagram above shows the rate of poor and near-poor households in districts of Son La province in 2017. In general, the rate of near-poor people was lower than that of the poor in most districts, except for Bac Yen where the poor made up 20% per cent and the near-poor constituted 34 per cent. With the average of 11.23 per cent, the rate of near-poor households in the whole Son La province was still at a high level. The lowest rate, of course, could be seen in the only city of the province, Son La City (around 1 per cent). However, in other remote and mountainous districts, the rate ranged from 6 per cent to 20 per cent. There are several explanations for the experience of falling back into poverty after escaping from it:

*The beneficiaries of poverty reduction projects and programmes are selected according to strict criteria. However, a number of policies only focus on solving the problems of poor people, without consideration of near-poor one. Hence people who live near the poor threshold are not*

*benefiting from them. As a result, after a period of no support, they can easily fall back into poverty' (SO06).*

The main problem is that the poor households are eligible for direct support from the poverty reduction programmes and policies while the near-poor and especially non-poor households are not. Moreover, with underdeveloped infrastructure, markets and the services, residents in remote and mountainous areas are exposed to high poverty incidence and the risk of falling back into poverty when an income shock arises (FGDs01; SO06; RO02). Additionally, the leading scholars in the domain of poverty reduction and community development in North West and Son La province of Vietnam (EP02; EP 04), after having consulted the opinions about poverty in Son La from other experts in the field, confidently believe that the actual volume of poverty is higher than the number that has been announced. It is also potential cause to increase the poverty proportion in the communes. Additionally, the high birth rates in these areas, particularly the H'Mong groups, is also a reason for falling back to poverty. The issue of the high birth rate is presented by a head of village as below:

*In our village, Mr VAL family is quite typical, his family has 6 children. They have not had a house for more than ten years since I knew him. Last year, they were provided with the materials and 1 billion under the decision 167/2008/QD-TTG7. However, he could not build a new house, the support ran out after only two weeks. In addition, his family has received 140, 000 VND per month for long time, but it cannot cover their basic needs. Only two of five children are going to school, others dropped out after they knew how to write and read (SC05).*

He continues:

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<sup>7</sup> Decision 167/2008/QD-TTG about the policy of supporting dwelling houses for poor households in rural areas across the country, signed by PM of Vietnam.

*Other families in our village are also in the same situation, they do not know how to apply modern technologies in their production. Therefore, people's needs are still not met although the government at both central and local levels have paid a lot of attention*

#### **5.2.5. Difficult terrain hampering poverty reduction**

Disadvantages of natural conditions such as mountainous topography, droughts and floods can also have adverse impacts on the living conditions of residents. The researcher had a chance to witness with his own eyes the difficulties locals have to face after a natural disaster. It was the year 2014, after the storm number 2 on 19 July 2014. 10 days after the storm, villagers in Phieng Luong village were still isolated; crops were destroyed; power and water were interrupted; external supports were not accessible. Residents did not even have enough food for a few days; their incomes were affected and after a few months the near-poor households became poor ones and some common households fell into the near-poor group (SC06).



**Figure 5.6 : The road connecting commune of H'Mong group to national road in Bac Yen district**

*(Source: Photos taken by the author from the fieldwork in Son La province, July, 2013)*





**Figure 5.7: The roads in the rainy and winter season in Nam Lau and Chieng Bom communes**

*(Source: Photos taken by the author from fieldwork in Son La province, January, 2014)*

The difficulty in transportation in these areas was also experienced by the researcher. In the first fieldwork to Nam Lau, it took nearly two hours to travel only 10km from the centre of Thuan Chau district because of the rain. When the researcher intended to visit some of the furthest villages in the commune such as

Tham Phe, Xa Hon, Huoi Xa and Huoi Kep, the leader of the commune suggested the researcher should not do so because the roads were very slippery and hilly and it can only be done on another drier day (CO04).

Difficult terrain blocks communication in these remote areas. Village and commune cadres cannot communicate with local residents when the road access is difficult after the rain or floods and the connection of mobile and telephone is also not available. Additionally, a striking characteristic of remote areas is low population density with only 2-3 households in a area of a few square kilometers (SC04), which exacerbates the difficulty of communication in these areas. An initiative was developed in relation to this problem in Nam Giat and Pha Luong villages, Phong Lai commune. An appointment would be made with cadres and informal heads of each group at village meetings and afterwards the heads would disseminate information to individual members in the groups (SC06; SC07).

Mountainous terrain is also an obstacle for service delivery in a number of ways (PO04). Not only does it make it more difficult to physically access services when compared with central or urban areas, but it also raises the cost of service investment in terms of transportation costs for materials and travel (LD04). For instance, with the same budget for water system improvement, the government can support 450 households in Chieng Xom commune where the terrain is more advantageous, but only 35 households receive benefits in Chieng Ngan commune - one of the furthest areas (LD05). Another example can also be found in the idea below:

*It would be right to say that geographic isolation is the factor that hampers the government's efforts to reduce poverty in these areas. Moreover, it is also the cause of backward economic system there because locals in these villages cannot bring their products to the commune central market for exchange except the weather is sunny for at least 3 days before the market open-day. As a result, they have to sell their products cheaper for intermediaries or dealers (who are mostly Kinh group). Take the corn, for*

*example, last year the price in Son La city was VND 5.700/kg while in some remote villages in our commune, the intermediaries bought only for VND 4.900/kg (SC05).*

It is easy to recognize the dependence of remote residents on private dealers who have better transportation vehicles. Even though the price margin is up to 20-50 per cent higher than other areas, local residents must sell their goods to dealers or they will have nothing to do with their products (Pham and Konishi 2009). In these areas, dealers are dominant on the price of goods and they buy outputs at low prices from locals and then sell inputs such as seeds, livestock feed and fertilizers at higher prices. The traders benefit from the poverty of poor people. It is suggested that building a market infrastructure is a way to promote commodity infrastructure and alleviate poverty (Pham et al 2009). The government should consider developing a new market system and infrastructures as well in these remote areas and impose policies on competitive or subsidized prices for local products originated from the poor.

### **5.3. The gap between policies and practice**

As mentioned above, despite the fact that Son La has gained some significant achievements in the poverty reduction process, there remain some important aspects to be completed and the poverty reduction process has been still faced with many challenges ahead. The gap between policies and reality is one of them. Even when an innovative idea is made and tends to come into a policy, its reality should be judiciously assessed. If there is any gap between its reality and theory, the government should understand and employ appropriate measures to narrow the gap. Otherwise, the gap will hinder the application of the policies in practice, leading to a waste of resources and outcomes under the expected level. In this section, the researcher will shed light to the gap between policies and reality regarding the



poverty reduction course in Son La province.

### ***5.3.1. Poverty measurement tool***

The first and foremost issue is the inappropriateness of the poverty measurement tool. As other provinces in the whole country, Son La province is also using two different approaches to measure poverty and monitor poverty reduction progress. Up to date there are two approaches to measure poverty commonly used in Vietnam. The first one is to measure the status of poverty by using the expenditure poverty line which is defined by the GSO together with the World Bank. The second approach is based on the income poverty line which is used by MOLISA and other authorities in Vietnam. As mentioned in Chapter two, as part of a national review of poor households, poverty line has been being used as a basic for developing the policies of social protection suitable with price fluctuations and living standards observed in that period. Accordingly, the government of Vietnam will adopt a new income line to evaluate poverty status every five years. In this research, all the statistical data of poverty, which were collected from the official reports and statistics from the local government, based on per capital income and income poverty threshold, as defined by the government of Vietnam for the period 2011-2015 (Dung 2011). The new official poverty line is up to 400,000 VND per person per month (£13) in rural areas and up to 500,000 VND (£16) per person per month in urban areas. The income poverty threshold for the period 2011-2015 is double that for the previous period in the rural areas. However, in the economic conditions of late 2014, many interviewees said that the national standard poverty threshold was still low compared with any standards such as paid employment, they could earn at least 50,000 VND (£1.25) per day, meaning that 1,200,000 VND (£37.5) per month (SC02; LR32; LR26). Therefore, the standard government poverty line may be not enough to convince them that the supports from the government, which are based on the poverty standards, can help the poor to meet basic needs.

The government should have more thorough and frequent investigations into the real living of citizens, especially in miserable areas, to find out how their lives have changed over the years, and to draw an updated trend of their disposable income. The updated statistics, then, is the best foundation to develop programmes and policies supporting the course of escaping from poverty of people in difficult provinces. The investigations should be implemented in terms of various methods, from collecting statistical data from local governmental agencies to direct research at sites of provinces, communes and villages. Direct observations and interviews should be the most important methods because the investigators will have the closest insights into the lives of citizens, based on which the most judicious policies will be developed.

***5.3.2. The lack of vision and inappropriate government programmes have not been able to develop the potential of Son La available resources***

The government programmes for poverty reduction in Son La are almost short-term and separate solutions are developed to solve current urgent problems, not thoroughly having any long-term strategic orientation. The rest partly are some projects with long-term implementation but not visionary and utilizing available potential integrated resources of Son La yet. In terms of programmes for people's living and social security improvement, poverty reduction, and labour and employment, the annual report about the situation of poverty reduction in Son La province in 2016 and the plan for 2017 by the People's Committee of Son La province accessed some short-term and urgent government programs in 2017 including emergency food assistance and mobilizing people for other poor households to borrow food; cash assistance, medical services, nursing, health care for the people; salary subsidies, bonuses, insurance and social allowances. Those programmes contributed to solve urgent problems, people had food and other living services to overcome a current poverty situation and disease in a short period of time, but they did not have any support for utilizing their resources if available like their own land for agriculture or tourism development.. Hence, the impact of those

programmes are not effective in terms of the long-term sustainable development of Son La. Meanwhile, they require large investment capitals from the government, waste resources, and even generate little influence in the long term. According to the survey stated in the report, the number of poor households reviewed by the end of 2016 is: 87,159 poor households, accounting for 31.91% of total households; 29,814 near poor households, accounting for 11.07% of total near poor households. In the whole province, five poor districts are entitled to policies under resolution 30a, 99 communes, 1,143 villages with extremely difficult socio-economic conditions. However, the price of goods and services consumed in the province in the year 2017 continued to increase slightly and maintained at a high level, even the authorities at all levels have focused on timely guidance to support 3,278 tons of rice to help the hungry and mobilize people to each other for rice loans to solve hunger, especially at the time of grain, the people's lives in the whole province in general have not changed much and not really improved. Especially among farmers, low-income workers, poor households, and starving people, there are still hungers in some rural areas, specifically, 31,109 households (141,317 people) suffered from hunger (People's Committee of Son La 2015). Other programmes of the government marked in the report also encountered this problem, the work of caring for the life of people with meritorious services and the policy beneficiaries has been paid attention to with 41,214 gifts and gifts valued at 11,935 million VND given to policy beneficiaries and families with special difficulties; nursing for 707 people with merit; 43 billion supported to build new housing for 1,075 households with meritorious services to the revolution; concerns about the medical examination and treatment for the elderly; nourishing and rehabilitation for 60 mental patients. Additionally, according to the report, regarding the payment of the salary, bonus, social insurance regimes, timely subsidies, right beneficiaries, regimes, the whole province has 1,078 thousand people participating in the health insurance system, occupying 92.5% of the province's population, including 709,190 poor, near-poor and ethnic minorities, they are granted health insurance cards. There are 60,852 compulsory social insurance participants and 1,395 voluntary insured participants

with monthly social subsidy for 27,534 beneficiaries of social protection, subsidy payment for 3,936 people with merit. Similarly, the people with disadvantages supported by those policies had temporary necessary liabilities for living and health improvement, but no tools for making their living and assets. They totally had potentialities to take a job, advantages to build their own assets through agriculture, tourism service, trade and commercial selling with the investment from the government. However, those programs are separate, timely, not focused, having long-term investment, and even reaching the people needs.

In term of some long-term projects stated in the programme to support five poor districts under resolution 30a/2008/NQ-CP, programs for poverty reduction in communes with special difficulties, programs 135, 193, 33, 160, 167, including poverty reduction project phase II, credit programs for the agricultural sector and rural areas, farmers, loans for production development, interest support credit programme for students, poor students and policy beneficiaries focussed on achieving sustainable poverty reduction. To motivate the implementation of loan programmes to create jobs, increase incomes, improve people's lives and socio-economic development, the organization provided employment consultancy for over 8,000 laborers, creating jobs for about 17,896 laborers, equalling 102.3 per cent of the plan, of which 61 are exported abroad, equaling 61 per cent of the plan. Even though the poverty rate of the whole province slightly decreased from 31.91 per cent in 2016 to 29.22 per cent in 2017; of which the poverty rate of the five poor districts decreased from 35.23 per cent in 2016 to 31.87 per cent in 2017 (down 4 per cent in districts); the existing problems in implementation and the approach to those programmes of the people are still affecting the long-term effectiveness of the project. The people in Son La province are almost not well-trained, educated and oriented to use available resources, even getting the capital from those programmes without professional training and consulting programmes from authorities in the field of agriculture, business and commerce to utilize their available resources, they tend to waste their own resources. Also, almost all

programmes require some basic standards to approach with the government and bank funding, not all poor households meet their requirements, also the complicated procedures to get fund or investment capitals are big barriers for implementation. Having said that, long-term investment without consulting, training, and support from professors to help the people utilize available resources are the lack of vision and long-term ineffectiveness.

*Government supports unsuitable for the needs of poor people*

The first reason for the inappropriate government programmes comes from the inappropriateness between government supports and the actual demand of poor people. It is observed that although the Vietnam government has been implementing a number of programmes and policies to support the poor, many of them are not suitable for the real need of people to be supported but rely on the subjective views of the government. (VN 2013). In Son La, the PPC have invested a huge budget on infrastructure development but some of them are inefficient. One of the typical examples is the infrastructure project constructed in Muong Giang commune, Quynh Nhai District. The government invested to build four markets in a small commune; however, after all of them were finished, only one market has been in use and three other ones are abandoned as illustrated in the picture below. According to Mr. Lo Van Ngoan, the president of Phieng Nen commune, Muong Giang commune needs to invest in building 11 houses of culture in the villages instead of many markets and bus stations as at present (Van 2015). It expresses how policy-makers and top district officials had ignored local residents' demands before commencing the construction. As explained by a participant of FGDs, the interests of government officers and planners were to shine on the stages when announcing the number of constructions built (FGDs04; LR16; LR28):

*Leaders of districts and communes would feel proud to announce that “my district (commune) has four markets, three schools, and the biggest culture*

*house in this area”, but the condition of them in term of quality and effectiveness of the use are normally not mentioned (LR16).*



**Figure 5.8: Phieng Nen market, Quynh Nhai District - “never in use after 4 years of completion”**

*(Souces: Son La newspaper online, Hien and Anh, 2015)*

One local citizen said that what they lack is not market, but a health care center and a culture house. But the government has just built the markets based on their own thinking and judgement without consulting with local people:

*The design and plan is wrong. We do not need too many markets in our commune at the moment. We need a health care center, or a culture house instead of a market. Because we do not have many goods to sell there. The market was designed in unsuitable places and the government did not ask us before they invested (LR33).*

This drawback has implications for the effectiveness of investments of the local government in infrastructure projects, which directly affects the poverty reduction results. The above types of investments clearly need to be re-evaluated. If the government effectively collected ideas from locals, the government would

understand that Son La people need an irrigation and water system which are now problematic. In agricultural activities, an irrigation water system is a main resource for many livelihood activities, production and keeps a positive role in the poverty reduction process (Hussain and Hanjra 2004). Investment in irrigation and water system is essential to help farmers cope with drought in summer; however, the government has proved to be wasting resources in this investment. At present, the irrigation and water system have been invested with high costs but on a small scale, leading to the inadequacy of water for the residents to cultivate two crops each year. A stark example is the irrigation system in Chieng Bom commune, which can only cover a narrow area but were built at a high cost several years ago. Similar to the water irrigation system for the farming, the potable water system has also in problems. In the FGDs with key stakeholders in Nam Giat village, all of the participants thought that water and irrigation is the most important in their village at the moment:

*If we have enough water for cultivation and daily life, we can escape of poverty and improve our standard of lives by ourselves (FGDs01).*

Local people in rural communes of Son La province, especially remote and mountainous areas, have been living in the difficult condition of lacking clean water for years. Their major potable water source is from natural streams and they have to use timber tubes to transport water from sources to their houses. Not taking into account the quality of this source of water, local people often have to suffer the water shortage in the dry seasons.



**Figure 5.9: Current potable water system in remote areas of ethnic minority group in Son La province**

*(Souces: Internet)*

This matter should be more acknowledged by the government and more appropriate and comprehensive investments should be poured into constructing potable water systems for local people, maybe in terms of a borehole pump system.

It can be said that this inappropriateness between policies and reality results from less mutual understanding between the government and locals, especially regarding the understanding about ethnic minority groups.

#### *The lack of participation*

Another reason for the ineffectiveness of the government policies is the lack of participation. Damien Cole, the Ambassador of Ireland in Vietnam, noted that, ‘*Vietnam should encourage ethnic minority participation in the policy formulation process*’ (VN 2013). This means that currently the participation of ethnic minority groups is inadequate and the government also lacks understanding about these groups. To be more specific, another problem of poverty reduction policies and programmes is that the government has not distinguished among individual ethnic



minority groups. Indeed, the majority of policies and programmes are now considering all ethnic minority groups as the same whereas in fact, they have various differences from each other:

*The government is using the “one-size-fits-all” approach. However, there is no doubt that 12 ethnic minority groups in Son La province have very different characteristics. They have distinctive cultures, languages, habits and practices (PO02).*

This view is also similar to the result of the research of Hung. et al (2011) that in Vietnam ethnic minority groups still preserve their own distinctive characteristic of language, cultural practices and norms. Additionally, the support from government programmes did not work as expected because direct money or in-kind support for the poor households created inertia, not promoting their participation like giving opinions, discussing about the real situation in their living, what they need. With passive position as receivers, not change makers, their awareness of the poverty reduction programmes is not high, and it is optional for them to join such programmes. In this regard, many economists say that we ourselves do substitute for the local people, but sometimes we do not understand customs, nature, climate, terrain. Policies are put into implementation ineffectively (The People's Deputies 2017). Also, the models are brought down by just what year and where but in lack of monitoring, management to replicate.

One of the remarkable projects that the government undertook to settle the lack of participation of the local people is The Programme for Poverty Reduction for the period of 2016-2020 by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. It was drafted and widely consulted from local people, building upon their opinions (The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2016). According to the programme, the population benefiting from the projects and works under the national programme for Poverty

Reduction has the following rights and obligations: the local authorities provide timely and publicly information on the policy, results of selection and priority order of projects or works under the national target programmes in their respective localities; contribute ideas to residential planning schemes, schemes for sedentarization and resettlement in new economic zones; plans and projects to mobilize and use the people's contributions to invest in infrastructure construction. In particular, the local people are involved in the implementation of national programmes, from planning to implementation. However, as stated in Chapter three, the majority of residents in Son La province are ethnic minorities, hence, their knowledge, skills and even cognition about Poverty Reduction and potentials for self-development are the big concern for the government and leaders. Hence, the effectiveness of this project depends much on the support from government and leaders. Dr. Dang Kim Son, former director of the Institute for Strategic Policy under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, added that with the addition of new funding sources to rural people and the poor, the most important thing is to arouse the spirit of initiative and creativity of the community of the people in which they live, thereby activating the existing internal resources, the most effective support from the outside. By now, farmers have not played a role in the development of a new countryside. Therefore, in the coming policy design, opinions of the people are extremely important. Only when people are involved in planning, finance, especially new rural development programs, could community participation be able to address the root causes of poverty.

### ***5.3.3. Overlapped and unharmonious policies***

Similar to almost other developing countries, Vietnam has most of the policies and programmes being well intentioned and usually aiming to improve the general conditions and achieve development (Akogutuh.A.Alasah 2008). According to Jones et al. (2009), currently Vietnam has 41 programmes and policies aiming at reducing poverty, especially in difficult communes through infrastructure

development, improvement of the life of people and production promotion. These programmes and policies are classified according to their approach of interventions and scope (Hung. et al. 2011: 72). They include the programmes aimed at improving the aspects of the ethnic minorities poor households's life, called comprehensive poverty reductions policies. Some policies and programmes place emphasis on support with a certain regional, province and some policies with 'sectoral approach', such as healthcare, housing, education or clean water. Although they have achieved many positive results, some factors blur the effective implementation of these programmes. The quality of infrastructure projects and effectiveness of investment are negatively impacted. In the interview with Mr. Binh, the former commune leader in Chieng Bom commune, he said that:

*Government has had a wide range of programmes and policies aiming to improve all aspects of the life of poor ethnic minority households like us such as providing easy access to public services, infrastructure, or helping us to participate in the labour market and I have awareness on the national policies when I was the president of the commune (SC05).*

The management and integration of different policies and programmes of poverty reduction is also very difficult due to different management and financial mechanisms and the several sectors are in charge of the same policies. Moreover, the number of overlapped programmes and policies are significant. This figure not only involves the poverty reduction policies and programmes for ethnic minorities but it is also true for implementing agencies. The localities have to comply hundreds of guidelines and regulations used for existing programmes in their area (Jones et al. 2009):

*There are so many provincial departments involved in implementation and management of interventions of poverty programmes and policies such as*

*Department of Planning and Investment; Department of Natural Resources and Environment; Department of Finance that we do not know who plays the most important role. It leads to the difficulty in ensuring an unified coordination mechanism among these departments and it decreases the effectiveness of these policies in order to improve the living standard of ethnic minority groups in Son La (PO 05).*

In addition, although there are many programmes and departments involving the course of poverty reduction, the available sources being used are relatively limited, which imposes a negative effect on the results of poverty reduction policies. Moreover, currently many departments run their own programmes, such as Department of Ethnic Minorities running P135; DOLISA running P30a; Department of Agriculture and Rural Development running the New Rural Development Programme, without a proper coordination with other departments. This weak coordination leads to the overlapping and wasting resources and prolongs the process of poverty reduction. (PO05):

*Our commune is on the list of all of three programmes including P135, P30a and New Rural Development Programme to invest to build new water systems. But each programme only has the investment capital from 1 to 2 billion (£33,300-£66,600). We can not build three water system separately. Because only 2 billion is not enough to set up a good water system for the whole village (SC03).*

The statistics of MOLISA have shown that only 58 per cent of the budget plan was met in 2013 (2016). The above data indicated that a huge amount of the budget was used ineffectively and wastefully. Particularly, some participants even said, some programme objectives are not feasible.

#### **5.3.4. Loophole in classification of poor households: Some poor is actually not poor**

There is a pressing problem among poor citizens in Son La province that there exists an injustice in classifying a household as ‘poor’. In the FGDs in Ta So 1 and Ta So 2 villages, the residents mentioned in a very early conversation:

*I know that some households, who have received the supports from government for years, are not truly poor. Most of people in the list of poor households in our communes have a relationship with the leaders of villages or communes. Although there have been many changes recently, the list of poor households still does not reflect the whole poverty picture in our communes. It has been found that many real poor households have not been named in the poverty reduction programme list (FGDs04).*

This fact was also mentioned by the scholar:

*We found that there are a huge number of “poor” households who are not poor. We do not know exactly the number however it is not lower than 10 percent in the total (EP03).*

The above statement was also highlighted in the research of Hung. et al (2010) but with much higher data. The results of his research prove that 38 per cent of support recipients were actually not eligible for having support from the poverty reduction programmes. In contrast, many of the non-poor and near-poor households are actually poor, but they were dispossessed of supports that they should have received for years. The reason is because of a ‘*poor selection mechanism*’. The classification of a household as poor, non-poor or near-poor in all communes need to be approved by the authorities who are normally the leaders of communes. The most commonly mentioned statement by the resident interviewees is that there exists a gap in the identification process for the poor. The poor households in the list are voted and confirmed by a commune people committee (LR15; LR32; LR33). After that, the poor list is submitted to the district level and the government will use it as an input

to draw the list of support recipients in the future plan. ‘*In some communes, the poverty rate has been “fixed” under 10 percent*’ (PO02). This point is also reflected at the national level through the conversation with Mrs. Pham Thi Hai Chuyen, the minister of MOLISA (Thuy, 2015). She referred to the Circular No.21/2012/TT-BLĐTBXH about guidances of the process of investigating and reviewing poor and near-poor households annually:

*If any province follows the rule of “alternately styled” poor household list, the leader of this province will be punished in case that the poverty rate is “fixed”. Accordingly, the incidence of the households must be investigated, evaluated in reality; therefore, if any local government who fixes the proportion of poor households will be against the rule. The authorities at all levels need to examine and review to ensure that objects are entitled to the poverty reduction policy.*

The content of the conversation of the ministry has implied that the current proportion of poverty households does not reflect the true picture of poverty in the whole country. We believe that in the first phase of the poverty reduction programme the ‘voting’ approach has some certain positive results, but at this stage it also generates the ‘group benefits’ or ‘clan benefits’, which is the culprit of inaccurate assessment. The irony is that there are many people who are really poor but have not been voted as ‘poor’ by the community, whereas many non-poor people have been voted into the poverty list because we are using the ‘over-half’ voting approach (PO02; SC03; SC06). A further reason is that the local government do not want to confirm the ‘true poor households’ (LR01; LR05; PO02). It is argued that because of ‘*achievement obsession*’ (“*bệnh thành tích*” in Vietnamese), the leaders of the local governments do not want to show the true picture of poverty in their areas. For example, in Nam Tron village, Chieng Ngan commune, in order to ensure the standard of ‘*number 3 city*’, the local government has tried to reduce the poverty head count to under the standard line whereas in fact the real figure is much higher than that. Therefore many of the real poor households in Chieng Ngan and

Chieng Den communes are out of the poor list. A similar case is that of the New Rural Development Programmes. Phong Lai and Chieng Ngan communes were chosen to be piloted for the first phrase of the programmes in Son La province. The program is attractive with a wide range of new investments. However, to be entitled to programmes benefits, the poverty rate of the communes must be maintained at lower than five per cent. As a consequence, in order to achieve the above criteria, the real picture of poverty has been distorted (PO03; LD06). In the reports by the local authorities on the number of poor households, many real poor ones were not mentioned. Therefore, they could not benefit from the assistance of poverty reduction policies in 2016 and 2017 and protested against that injustice (LR07; LR15; DO01; EP02).

The ineffectiveness of poverty reduction also results from the leakage in selecting target objects. According to the official report by the Ministry of Labour Invalids and Social Affairs (2014), existing poverty reduction and social protection policies and programmes are able to partially cover and provide limited benefits to mountainous and remote areas as well as 30a communes<sup>8</sup>, particularly to the poor and people at risk in these areas. Statistical data from the government has also indicated that only around a half of extreme poor households may benefit from the above programmes and policies (SLSO, 2017; VMOLISA, 2013):

*As a result of the leakage in targeting, it is obvious that some poverty reduction resources might have gone to the wrong addresses and beneficiaries, while a large number of poor people are not able to benefit from poverty reduction policies (LD04).*

One resident interviewee in Thuan Chau district also supported this point:

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<sup>8</sup> The communes receive the benefit from programme 30a.

*In order to achieve the objective of poverty reduction, some local authorities at commune level do not pick up the really poor households in the poor list. Instead, they select some others who are “able to” escape from poverty. Such being the case when our target of this years is to reduce 50 to 70 poor households in their commune, the leader of CPC will select 70 most “potential” poor households (LD06).*

However, the DOLISA officer did not agree with the idea of ‘achievement obsession’ because he argued that his department had checked the living conditions of poor people in the poor list randomly and did not detect any errors as mentioned:

*We have checked a few times per year randomly. We look at the poor list and check in different communes to edit the approach but only one household which is a wrong beneficiary since last year has been detected.*

Provincial officers at both province and district level also agreed that the list of beneficiaries depends on local authorities. Furthermore, the former officer of Son La’s People’s Committee emphasized the lack of rationality and corruption that lead to wrong targeting:

*Heads of villages do not understand enough and did not read our regulations carefully. They are in the position to be able to put their relatives or friends into the poor list to benefit from the poverty reduction programmes and policies. Therefore, many of actual poor people are not in the list. The heads of villages are the main people to decide who are benciaries from poverty reduction programmes.*

Higher-level government has tried to limit the bias caused by local authorities in the



targeting of poor households. One measure is that at the final month of the year or final stage of the programmes, the administratives at higher levels hold a meeting and invite local residents, particularly poor households, to evaluate the effectiveness of the programmes. However, these meeting are not as effective as they expected:

*Many poor people are absent. Just some people come (PO03).*

If the ideas of citizens were collected and understood by the government, many problems in poverty reduction could be overcome. In this case, a survey is a good method to collect information. However, one officer of MOLISA asserted that they could not have sufficient resources to organise an efficient survey and this caused the survey not to be done in a proper manner by some local staff. Particularly in the commune level, the officer in Chieng Bom elaborated this point:

*When conducting several surveys among poor households, instead of coming to households to collect the information of the local residents about the income, livelihood resources, the effectiveness of the poverty reduction programmes and so on, local staff usually stayed at home or their office to fill fake information and revised the data. This happened because the financial resource for the survey is insignificant, thus they were paid at a very low cost while this job required a lot of hard work (EP02).*

Another participant compared their job with the tasks of other departments:

*With other projects, they have enough staff, specialists and budget with a small-scale sample, whereas we do not have enough money and human resources to conduct surveys in our projects.*

A specialist of Son La's Department of Planning and Investment also supported this idea:

*The government cannot afford the costs for the survey on all of 140 thousand households in the province. Thus, we have to do it qualitatively thereby it brings subjective results. The accuracy cannot be ensured.*

Besides the fact that the central government can only pour limited funds into poverty surveys, local governments also try to minimise their costs to carry out such surveys. As a result, the local authorities usually choose an easier option to define the poor households.

A number of measures have been established to prevent corruption and bias by local authorities, particularly in the commune and village levels. Thereby, the targeting process allows the participation of local residents during the selection of the poor households. Local residents are supposed to come to selection meetings to vote for the list of poor households before the final decision is made. However, this participation regulation has not been seriously followed in practices. Some reports and press have shown that many local residents cannot access the information regarding the selection process of poor household undertaken by the leaders of villages and communes; and therefore, they do not come to selection meetings. Furthermore, many poor households were not informed that they had been removed from the commune's poor list and the benefits from poverty reduction programmes that they used to receive previously had been given to other households who had better living conditions but were in "close relationship" with the leaders of the commune and village (Toan 2015 Bien 2016). One officer from the local poverty reduction department stated that she felt very disappointed and unhappy when the province's People's Committee has to deliver money to support wealthy households who are not poor and can afford their daily lives, dispossessing of the opportunities

for others who indeed need the support to afford their daily lives (PO04).

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overall view of the current status of poor households in Son La province in Vietnam. Even the governments at both central and province levels have already paid a lot of attention to reduce the poverty rate in Son La in different ways, however, ethnic minority improvements are still at a slower pace compared to the Kinh (majority group). As a consequence, the gap between the Kinh and ethnic minorities has widened over time. Ethnic minority groups account for more than 96 per cent of the poor households within the province. Poverty is a particular phenomenon of ethnic minority groups in Son La. An overall assessment of the status of the poverty situation in Son La province within the last few years indicates that poverty is becoming more and more diverse and the poverty reduction achievement has been uneven among districts. Food shortage still exists in some places. The standard of life in the poorest groups in the remote villages improves slowly. That poor households themselves do not want to get out of the list of the poor remains prevalent as various programmes still provide direct assistance for the poor people. The percentage of near poor households remains high and they are at a high risk of falling back to poverty. Also, there is the likelihood that many poor and near poor households have not been reported because of '*achievement obsession*'

.

With regard to the participation and empowerment of poor people and the community, although it is a major objective of the policies and programmes of the government of Vietnam and has been increasing recently, it is still far from government expectations. As said by Mr Danien Cole, the Ambassador of Ireland in Vietnam, '*Vietnam should further encourage ethnic minority participation in the policy formulation process*'

(VN 2013). The foregoing analysis of the process of an asset-based approach sets the foundation for the next chapter (six), which is based upon in-depth interviews with senior poverty reduction officials and experts and local residents conducted for this research. Chapter seven critically discusses the achievements and the challenges currently facing the strategies of poverty reduction of Son La province in particular and Vietnam in general.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **ROLE OF ABCD IN POVERTY REDUCTION PROCESS**

#### **6.1. Introduction**

As discussed in the thesis so far, the last decade has witnessed an increasing approach to address the effects of poverty in Vietnam. Many models have been introduced to address poverty and further initiate development, and ABCD is one of them. Although a lot of attention has been paid to this approach across the world (Trang et al. 2014; Haines and Green 2012; McKnight and Block 2011; McKnight and Kretzmann 1993), it has been relatively understudied in Vietnam. Ridiculously, where poverty happens more ruthlessly, less awareness about poverty reduction tools are generalized. For instance, in Son La province, where more than 86 per cent of the population are ethnic minority groups, the education level is still very low (UBND 2015c). An asset-based approach, such as ABCD, is a relatively new poverty reduction approach. While drawing upon the same fieldwork and data discussed in the previous chapter, the task of this chapter is distinctly different - to examine the contribution of ABCD in the sustainable poverty reduction process in the chosen research sites. This chapter is designed to investigate in detail the contribution of ABCD in poverty reduction in Son La province.

As outlined in chapter two, asset mapping is an early and important stage of the ABCD approach. Chapter six will take the ABCD approach into deeper discussion. Firstly, we will take the present situation of applying traditional poverty alleviation approaches in consideration to point out current need-to-avoid pros and need-to-follow cons of them to make an experienced reflection for ABCD approach in the

first two parts of the sixth chapter (6.2 and 6.3). Secondly, the full stages of employing the ABCD approach will be put into consideration, including identifying, mapping and mobilizing naturally local assets of the community, which in this study is Son La province. In the final section of the chapter (6.4), we will discuss both the theoretical approach adopted and its connection to the empirical material reported in order to frame a final, reliable conclusion in chapter seven.

## **6.2. Overall evaluation of the current performance of Son La pre-ABCD-approach poverty reduction attempts**

Before investigating ABCD in detail, a thorough understanding of what attempts have been made into reducing the poverty rate in the research site, Son La province, is needed. There have been a number of approaches that have been implemented and many have received positive responses from the local population. However, these are far from totally satisfactory from the point of view of both local people and authorities. Each of these former programmes has included both pros and cons.

### ***6.2.1. Success points***

During the fieldwork period in Son La province, the author had a chance to witness the many difficulties and challenges that the poor and ethnic minority communities in Son La have been facing. Additionally, many nearly successful poverty reduction models have also been recognised. In this section, I will find out the key selling points of these models which are in common at the community level by showing successful stories I have perceived in the research sites. There are many factors that affect and contribute to the success of poverty reduction stories across the five chosen communes. However, this study only presents the main elements, which have been shown and tested through interviews with different stakeholders of the communes and province, as well as a comparison between different successful stories within different communes, combined with secondary data from official

reports of local government. When discussing this, it is useful to focus on the reasons of not being poor in the chosen communes. In other words, much is revealed by attempting to answer the question ‘why are some EM households not poor ?’. As noted in previous chapters, the success in escaping from poverty in some of the research areas when compared to others has been related to distinctive regional characteristics, including advantages in terms of nature, culture, geography, physical and social capital. This section will investigate how the residents in some of the research sites used the above advantages effectively to achieve a reduction in their own poverty situation.

One ABCD mission is to collate previous other methods to create a thorough and comprehensive ABCD to erase poverty in all its aspects. ABCD’s statement is also about combining an enormous amount of experience from previous programmes to develop the most complete ABCD approach. Thus, a further question to address in this chapter is ‘what principles of ABCD are utilised in successful stories in Son La province to enhance poverty reduction in a sustainable manner ?’.

#### *6.2.1.1. Success of asset drivers: the role of local leaders and pioneers*

The first successful indication of many positive programmes is the development of forerunners. During fieldwork in Son La, the researcher found that there are some villagers successful in raising the income of their family in the last few years and they also transfer their experiences, skills and knowledge to other villagers, encouraging others to follow them (LR15; SC03; Thao and Baker 2014). Interestingly, many ‘successful examples’ are not necessarily highly educated, even literate, nor are they local government officials. There are many families in the chosen research communes who have successfully escaped from poverty and improved their living standard by using their own resources. They played leading roles in shifting from cultivation of the old rice and corn varieties to high yielding rice and corn and other industries such as tea and coffee production. Taking an

example in Chieng Hac commune:

*Mr H.D.C is the leader of the village and the leader of communist party in Ta So village. He has started planning hybrid corn, arrowroot, and paddy rice since 2005. After five years, with the successful experimenting, he could encourage all the H'Mong households in his village follow his ways (SC04).*

After more than ten years growing rice and hybrid corn, the community's face has changed significantly; however, it is not enough as the villagers subsequently found that they could not afford livestock raising because there are not enough grazing places or expensive animal feeds. Besides afforestation which brings high income yet takes a long time to get the turn-over, the poor fortunately sought that growing tea, which requires less initial investment and lower planting techniques, could support their lives. Furthermore, tea is an appropriate mountainous plant in terms of climate, soil and water. Another factor that used to pose potential threats to rice, hybrid corn and other short-day plants is unstable markets for output products. Nonetheless, regarding tea, many things have changed. The Lam Dong tea factory has made a bright prospect for any amount of output tea produced. In a rough calculation, for each 360-meter square of tea cultivated surface, a household could get back about 1.5 million VND each month in the first year, then double in the following year, though the initial investment is about 5 to 6 million VND. In comparison with other short-day plants, coffee, for example, farmers should reinvest and take care of crops every year, whereas, tea could survive for a long period and could be harvested every year with a small amount of reinvestment. Thus, the villagers understand that growing tea is an affordable and feasible approach to escape from poverty sustainably.

#### *Natural capital*

Agricultural land, upland fields, forest and water resources are the main natural capital sources that are most abundant in mountainous areas, such as Son La. In



most of the successful stories, there is a ‘positive devian, who is one of the most adorable in developing the economic situation of their families.’ However, there are still many households, who continue to work in upland fields, which may take them a few hours to reach and return from. Small and unflat land topography allows villagers to do nothing to upscale their crops by large-scale agricultural machines or apply technology in improving rice quality.

### *Human capital*

‘The infrastructure system has improved much better than before. Bau’s cooperative can export 3-5 tons of green tea to Taiwan each day. Now, he is thinking about coffee, it is potentially feasible, yet rice is less expected.’ Indigenous knowledge helps EM people make use of land in the ways that can diversity their income and reduce risks. Moreover, as a proverb said ‘don’t put all eggs on one basket’, to reduce the risks of relying on only one plant, it is essential to diversify agricultural products. Vocational training was also provided at all five communes in different scales. Some were covered under the government supports as previously mentioned, but some are provided and shared by the experiences of their own villagers. There are many policies in place that aim to support the participation of poor and ethnic minority people in vocational training in these areas (UKAid et al. 2012; PO01; PO02):

*Currently, there are some vocational training offerings available in our province such the animal health, mushroom farming, tea farming, coffe farming and also some motorbike repair or even carpentry (PO03).*

#### *6.2.1.2. Success of relationship-driven*

The road leading to success is not smooth and flat. An extraordinary leader does not guarantee better lives for the whole community without strong unitedness. Luckily, solidarity is an awesome virtue of the Vietnamese. Community cohesion is a tradition of ethnic minorities not only in Son La province, but also in the whole of

Vietnam. During difficult times, relationships in the village is a major resource and a pillar of the poor. In all five chosen communes, community cohesion is very strong (SC07; PO03). It is one of the most positive and important factors to enhance livelihood efficiency and to help reduce the number of poor households in our commune (SO03; LR16; LR28). All of them agreed strongly that the huge proportion of the population in remote villages are poor and have not got good conditions to help themselves individually. The leader of youth organisation in Chieng Hac said:

*We are still poor therefore all of us need to work together. We have to cooperate instead of working individually. If we want to achieve our objectives, working together is the best solution (FGDs04).*

Another resident from the same focus group discussion added that ‘*we have the idiom “Together we can change the world” (một cây làm chẳng nên non, 3 cây chụm lại lên hòn núi cao). If one person cannot make things happen, three persons can do that*’.

These findings show a clear perception of the local residents, that mutual action and social cohesion is appreciated and important for the poverty reduction progress. The social cohesion of local residents is shown in the following several aspects.

#### *Exchanging labour*

This method helps to increase productivity and allow experience sharing among ethnic minority groups (SC05; LR16; Thao and Baker 2014). It is popularly used in Phong Lai, Chieng Hac communes by not only Thai, H’Mong, but also Kinh households, particularly during peak times of labour intensive crop season such as for planting, harvesting and weeding.

*My husband has 8 brothers and sisters. All of us have 1 or 2 kids therefore we cannot have enough labourers, in the harvesting period. We often exchange labour. For example, last week I and my husband came to help Thuy's family to harvest corn, next week they will come to help us harvest in our field. My family cannot afford production equipment (LR16).*

The method could provide them, particularly the poor households, with better conditions for production. During my observations, I could see this method was the most popular in Phong Lai commune. Interestingly, the Kinh group in Kien Xuong and Dong Quan villages used it more popularly than minority groups within the commune:

*This was previously a very popular practice in this village however this method has become less popular when the labour market has recently developed. But with the remote villages such as Khau Lay, Ban Pe, Lai Le villages still keep an important role (SC07).*

During the exchanging labour process, the participants also have an opportunity to share experiences, information and learn from each other in livelihood production and, most importantly, to help the poor household better integrate into the community (SC02; SC07; LR32). Some Thai villages in Nam Lau such as Long Choc, Long Lau or H'Mong village in Chieng Ngan such as Nam Tron still jointly manage their animal herds. 5 -10 households organised a small cluster with one member in each family coming to check animals every week, in case any house in the groups lacks labour, they can request others to help them to look after their animals.

#### *Traditional custom of ethnic minorities in the North-East areas*

In the ethnic minority communities of the North East, they are often joining each

other to do community work (PO03). This way could help them to strengthen ties within the communes.



***Picture 6.1: The practice of contributing labour, construction materials and money to build the “concrete village road” in It Ong village, Muong La district, Son La province.***

*Source: Photo was taken by the author from fieldwork in Son La province in June, 2015.*

*Money is not the most important factor required to start the construction, since each member of the village took their time and effort to build our new facilities such as village road, water system, culture house and so on. The attendance could receive with a small constructors or not. However, we could reduce a huge number of budget investment in these constructions. Like this road, the government gives us cement, sand and rock but we can build a very useful concrete road (CO06).*

The central government does not have enough money to invest in all poor villages in the short term, therefore the contribution of the local residents is an important factor to achieve the national target in reducing poverty rate (PO03). In many localities, residents are very enthusiastic and constructive when joining each other (PO02; PO03; Thao and Baker 2014). In some remote villages, the villagers work

together to build some classes for their children (SC03). Even in the mixed-ethnic minority group such as Ban Dun village in Chieng Ngan commune with Thai; Kinh; H'Mong groups; they still join in commune work together (SC02).

The factor of family is also traditionally seen as a solid foundation for development of the next generations. As mentioned in the previous section, after marriage a newly married couple will be allocated certain land areas and receive support from parents during the early years of their marriage:

*We still help my son and his wife. They have their own family but still share daily meals with us. When they have better and more stable economic conditions, I will give them land and help them build their own new house. To start a new family life, those things could help to create a solid life foundation for my children. In order to help them not into poverty, parents and relatives need to support them (LR15).*

The above statement reveals further information that the connection through relatives remain an important pillar for poor households when they are facing difficult circumstances. Indeed, in Thai and H'Mong communities, the ties of relatives and brotherhood are often very strong and last for many generations (PO03; PO02; EP01). Almost all of them can offer their poor relatives many things such as labour, rice, money or even contribute together to build a new house. This is also consistent with the results of some previous studies (SL 2015; Rambo 1998; Swinkels and Turk 2006). The mutual support through marital related relationship is also a common phenomenon in ethnic minority communities. Mr H.A.C in Ta So village is a typical example:

*In 2000s my family was one of the poorest households in our village. After I learned from my brother-in-law how to run a small family business, then got*

*his support for money and land for production, I escaped of poverty since 2010 and was no longer poor. Now, my family has not only enough rice to eat but we also have two cows, about one hundred chickens and a few pairs of pigeons (LR36).*

Mass organizations in the research communes such as Farmer's Union, Women's Union, Youth Union, Veteran's Union also have very positive contributions to the strengthening of the linkage of local residents through mutual support or exchange activities between different families:

*Women's Union of the Kien Xuong village has effectively worked to assist villagers to access preferential credit. Many households gave positive feedback about their role in the socio-economic development and poverty reduction progress (SC07).*

However, again, some of the participants (LR02; LR06; LR28) said that the activities of mass organisations are still not very active and too dependent on instructions from higher levels such as commune or district

.

#### *Some traditional and informal institutions*

Spiritual worship and traditional festivals contribute to strengthening community cohesion and play significant roles in the lives of ethnic minority communities. Furthermore, the role of ethnic minority officials in poverty reduction and socio-economic development at the grassroots level such as village and commune is also very important. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in all five communes, the majority of the population are ethnic minority. Only the president of Phong Lai commune is Kinh, all others are local ethnic minority people. They share the common language with the citizens, have a better understanding of the local context and have much greater ease in mobilizing and engaging villagers in commune and

village activities (PO05; EP02; SC06).

It is noteworthy that, in the research communes, the participatory socio-economic development planning process and decentralized financial and fiscal management have not been implemented. Consequently, the voices of the community core members and villagers toward external resources and public services are very limited (SC07). Therefore, the positive role of grassroots governance has only been utilized through promoting the internal strength of the community rather than improving the accountability of public service providers and higher authority hierarchy toward lower levels.

#### *6.2.1.3. Leverage of outside resources*

Poverty can be alleviated by an effective collaboration between inside and outside communities. An obvious example is borrowing knowledge; especially that in fundamental science and updated techniques applying in agriculture. Now, the major source of information about farming techniques and advices for farmer mostly is the association of farmers. According to Collver (2013), ABCD rests on two pillars. The first draws on evidence to support that any significant community developments take place in the context of community members being directly invested with their resources in the development process (McKnight and Kretzmann 1993). The second suggests the development of internal resources are necessary in contrast to the prospect of outside help as bleak (McKnight and Kretzmann 1993). Nevertheless, internal factors leading to local development seem less persuasive to build up capacity without the help of external assistance. It is because, though, local farmers have been equipped with requisite knowledge and skills, they still seem ineffective unless the governments and/ or local authorities have the favourable policies. There are several sources for local people to connect to external opportunities; of which local and national associations, NGO's help and international aids are the most common available supplies.

### *Local and national associations*

In a community-based country like Vietnam, there is a proverb saying that ‘imperial power bends to suit rural customs’, thus, village culture of giving help whenever is needed seems to be deeply rooted inside every (wo)man’s head. Local affiliations are favourable sites to strengthen this moral code, thus, it is warmly welcomed by most of villagers to not only achieving new knowledge and techniques but also sharing better methods with others. At the upper level, national associations also strengthen inner-activities of local affiliations and create favourable conditions for them to exchange initiatives.

### *NGO’s assistances*

NGOs also have an essential role to play in connecting locals with government, sponsors and marketing. Son La provincial body has given a favourable environment for many NGOs to participate in poverty reduction work in the area. Some of them are: UNDP, WB, IDA, SIDA, ADB, and so on. Many residents show their respects to NGO’s works in providing vocational training for them and joining a hand in marketing their outputs which are specially sold to sponsors at their willing. Also, NGO’s most critical part is building a bridge between the local and government’s regulators so that their voices can be heard. It seems that NGO practitioners, sometimes, work better than communal authorities on keeping higher level bodies updated on problems and progress.

### *International connections*

Connections at country-level usually bring lots of benefits to locals with opportunities to be updated with modern and eco-friendly cultivating practices and breeding techniques as well. For a quick review, there are mainly three factors leading to a partial success of foregoing and ongoing poverty alleviation programmes and policies. First point is the point of finding original assets among the community, then turning these assets into a breakthrough to get out of poverty.



Instead of making updated versions without any changes like many previous government policies and inter-provincial programmes in which the same approach will be applied province and province, with no regard for the significance of different geographical, economical and social contexts . Even though these points are often missed, some programmes have achieved some success and still gain acknowledgement by making sure the strong inner community relationships are maintained. It is necessary to mention the importance of a dynamic leader and the well-known unity spirit of the Vietnamese in these successes. Other reasons for success include the leverage of outside resources such as favourable supporting policies and updating production techniques into villages.

### **6.2.2. Limitations**

#### *6.2.2.1. Lack of information from the local people's view*

The most and major obstacle, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is revealed by the finding of the research showing that due to the short-comings in the power of local residents, many prearranged poverty alleviation regulations are under-implemented. A successful key, which, yet, is not potential enough to make the whole method successful:

*Regarding the local indigenous, particularly the ethnic minority groups living in the remote and rural areas, they should have their voice on the policy and programme decisions (LD02).*

This reason was also reinforced by local leaders who were interviewed in the FGDs to share their perspectives about lower level communities' power in legislation process. One said:

*Lets give the lower level community like villages and communes like us an*

*equal chance to express our opinions before any decisions are going to be reached at the upper level community (FGDs02).*

This implies that the decision-making process is basically decided by a few top authority bodies even though these regulations have a direct impact on the poverty status of lower-level areas. Therefore, many regulations and programmes for poverty reduction arrived the commune without the voices of local residents. (LR06; CO02; CO07)

As outlined in chapter three, the purpose of the people's committee at the district and commune level is to ensure that specific and typical problems or issues that are being faced by their communities are going to be pointed out exactly. In the general meetings (at villages or communities level) the local residents will discuss with others to identify their own problems of their humlets, villages and to prioritise these problems instead of identifying their assets and potential and untapped capacity that already exists within the commune (LD01; LD05; LR16). One of the leaders in Phong Lai commune explained how the local residents in his commune participate in planing for the future poverty reduction policies:

*When the government plan to design the new programmes<sup>(9)</sup> or policies for us to address the poverty in the areas we will organise some meetings with the local residents and leaders of each village. During the general meetings we will identify the main problems in each villages and the whole commune, forward them to the DPC, who will be responsible for integrating these issues into the country-level socio-economics development plan for the next period<sup>9</sup>. These priotities are forwarded to the province People's Committee to be re-prioritised before implementation (SC06).*

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<sup>9</sup> The length of the period depends on the plan, it should be short term such as 6 months or one year. Or could be the long-term plans such as 10 year or more.

Another interviewee at province level described the similar process with example from one poverty reduction project in Thuan Chau district:

*we received proposals with a list of priorities such as: invest in the health care centre, culture house, toilets, drinking water systems, from the commune through the district people's committee. We then decided which issues should be put on precedence over others to be included on district-level socio-economic development plan before being handed to the Ministry of Plan and Investment for approval and budgeting (LD04).*

Even though the central government policies recognise the need for collaboration in the designing of poverty policies, local residents seem not deeply interested in being involved in the decision making process. That is because no effort of raising local free speech rights has been made, thus contributing a voice in legislation is usually misunderstood as opposing to those in positions of powers or anti-establishment offence(DO01).

#### *6.2.2.2. Focus on urgent problems in the short term, not for comprehensive and thorough solutions*

The above planning and decision-making process only suggests that local residents identify problems that are considered as obstacles to the poverty reduction activities in their areas instead of identifying the assets, potential and untapped capacity which already exist within the community. But the People's Committee at district, province, even central government level, are in a position to prioritize the next action. They stated:

*When the context of programmes and policies are promulgated, we just come*

*to compare and confirm how many of our priorities are selected (SC07).*

Based on the above statements, the process of building the policies and programmes for the poor people seems to lack transparency and accountability. This is because the rulers are not the poor so that many implementation plans do not actually fit with local residents and their lived experience. Another resident, who participated in the FGDs, added:

*During the meetings, the province, district officers or could be the leaders of the commune will explain about the content of the programmes, policies and procedures for implementation and what resources we need to contribute but do not care we have or do not have.(FGDs04)*

This opinion is also supported by others interviewees (LR15; SC04; LR26). According to Thinh (2015), in the kind of above meetings, it seems that the main duty of government officers<sup>10</sup> is to inform the content of the programmes and the duty of the resident is to agree on their contribution. Hence, the residents will be passive with little opportunity to show their views and opinions. This means that they have to agree with government plans, as mentioned by a villager:

*Why should we agree? There are many things not like our opinions. It is like one kind of pressure (LR24).*

Another added:

*Yes, they asked our opinions. However, the content of programmes seems not like them. Rather, before coming here, they should have planned everything in their office. They decided what and how everythings should be done (LR22).*

Even the leader of the commune said:

*We asked our local residents but after that, we forwarded their opinions to the district people's committee and they decided. We received the information but had no right to choose which way to implement it (SC02).*

This implies that even a local authority tries hard to draft a socio-economic development plan that exactly focuses on the poor. The problem is that they have no right to make it come true because decision-making rights belong to the upper-level authorities. It seems that the meetings, are normally held at the commune and

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<sup>10</sup> At different level: District, province or centre government.

village level, in order to empower the local residents. However, the reality is not as expected. After attending two local assembly meetings in Kien Xuong villages, Phong Lai commune and one in Ta So village in Chieng Hac commune in my field trip, I recorded that the attendance was very low and some turned up when the meetings were almost finished. Through informal conversations with the attendance, including the leader of the commune, the reason of the low attendance was identified. The first thing to point out is that local population is usually scattered, so it is difficult to gather a large number of attendees to an informed meeting place. The second, the time of the meeting overlaps with the time they are in the fields. Agricultural activities are still the main source of their income and livelihood. The meetings are normally at the weekend but they do not want to waste their time that could be spent in the field. Thus, it is not convenient and they do not participate.

#### *6.2.2.3. Not based on the real needs of the local people*

As mentioned above, at the village level, the poor are engaged in the process of defining needs and then these are reported to districts and province authorities by the heads of the villages before forwarding to central government. However, findings from the research reveal that this multi-tier government system can distort the needs of the poor at different levels of authorities, from commune to central government. They consolidate and modify the needs again before forwarding to higher level. As a result, the final list is quite different from the original one. Moreover, the need assessment process is usually just a formality. This implication is reinforced by the result of many interviews with ethnic minority groups, for example, the H'Mong:

*On the contrary, a paradox is that all regulations and programmes against the poverty and other guidebooks instruct essential steps to be taken in order to alleviate the poverty rate are ridiculously the same for everyplace despite*

*distinguished unique features of each region. However, if local authorities and associations change a detail, it will be marked as not follow upper-level direction. Indeed, the budget of these programmes depends on centre government. As the result, the richer is the ruler, lower authorities and associations are in a passive position and hard to create great influence’.*

Some local authority staff even point out that based on a fixed socio-economic development plan of the next period, the top bodies will provide a fixed amount of budget, which is, absurdly, divided roughly even to every level without considering reality. To explain this top-down action, most of upper level officials give the same words that is in order to save time and money in making fieldtrips, and if a specific community need more money than others, they will consider to approve the request through a paper-consuming, time-consuming yet making-nonsense process due to lack of national budget. The same happens in the process of voting for the poor list, in which the poor household will receive a fixed amount of stipend monthly to support their basic living, in each community. Instead of considering other neighborhood’s opinions about a poor household, it is the leader of village who has a right to decide finally. Unfortunately, this decision is risky and subjective. Most of the villages argued that the final list is far from their suggestion and that many households who are on the poor list are not actually ‘poor’, but simply have favourable relationships with the leaders. So that, what the poor need to handle is not only fighting against the poor, but also maintaining a good relation with the leaders. Where do the financial aids come from ? Most of them derive from the national budget, but due to the psychological trend, there is an increasing amount of aid coming from other international organizations or other governments’ help.

#### *6.2.3.4. Not totally fair for both minority and majority groups*

One final thing to point out is there is still an uneven concern between minority and

majority groups in society. Sometimes, improvement in public services and upgrade in essential infrastructure do not actually benefit the local people because of a lack of raising local awareness, yet they benefit the majority, who already know how to utilise these advantages.

### **6.3. SWOT analysis for new method, ABCD application in current Son La poverty reduction situation**

#### ***6.3.1 Strengths***

Whilst the former government programmes for poverty reduction in Son La lacked vision, focusing on current problems in the short term and not totally utilizing the potential of Son La for sustainable development, ABCD is the ideal methodology for the government and leaders in Son La province to enable to build a long-term integrated strategy for the development of Son La. The area has a range of potentially very strong resources, as stated in the part 2 of this chapter: assets of natural capital, social capital, financial capital, physical capital, and human capital; strong internal and external relationships (with exchange labour, traditional and informal institutions, traditional custom of ethnic minority in the North-East areas); leverage of outside resources (NGOs' assistance, local and national associations, international connections).

The ABCD approach originally is a method originally based upon the needs and goals of community development, accessing integrated available resources of the area, both tangible and intangible. That means the ABCD approach does not only provide short-term solutions for community issues, but approaches the issues and even the goal of development in different fields including agriculture, tourism, education and job creation thoroughly, by concentrating on building the foundation and core competitive edge to reduce poverty. For example, instead of launching



funding programs to support disadvantage through money, insurance and health check-up services, ABCD focuses on long-term implementation strategies like manufacture, commercial or service production, exploiting the potentiality of the area. As to be mentioned, assets in ABCD are not only natural resources but also human capitals - skills, craftsmanship, relationships between local people. Hence, with the ABCD approach, the government and leaders can develop visionary strategies based on integrated potentials to reach the goal of development in multiple aspects - economics, education and well-being. It is not just about solving specific or isolated problems.

### ***6.3.2 Weaknesses***

Lack of participation or a lack of the local people's voice in poverty programmes is found in both former programmes and in the ABCD approach. This issue can be explained in both theoretical and practical terms.

Originally, from the first stage of ABCD approach implementation, asset evaluation is the foremost and decisive factor to the success of poverty programmes, because it decides total fund and investment, people being in charge, time to execute, and even the practicality of the programmes. However, the asset evaluation is only based on subjective one-sided opinions and judgement from the government and authorities, and a concomitant lack of information from local people's view on their real need, situation and experience. Participation of the local people is indispensable to ABCD and poverty alleviation.

Community resources are often assessed by establishing a resource map, consisting of five components: individual citizens; the local organizations and corporations; local unions; facilities; and the local economy. According to the report of Hanoi National University about assessment and mobilization of community resources in the new rural development procedure in Son La communes, community resources

are diverse, but most of these resources have not been exploited and mobilized in the process of building new rural areas for their own communities because of the dissimilarity between ethnic minority and majority groups evaluation, the inappropriate policies to encourage the people to participate in the programmes, as well as lack of information and training for local people about the goals, orientation, and importance of the programmes (Nguyễn Duy Cần, Trần Duy Phát, Phạm Văn Trọng Tính, Lê Sơn Trang 2012).

### ***6.3.3 Opportunities***

The application of the ABCD approach is gradually becoming a popular and inevitable trend for integrated community development in Vietnam, as illustrated by some major projects of The Center for Resource Management Research and Consultancy (CORENARM), the Center for Educational Exchange with Vietnam, as well as training programs at universities and private commercial organizations. An agreement to implement ABCD approach in projects across the country, along with the participation of other powerful non-governmental organizations in Vietnam, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, FAO, ILO and the World Bank, would be a decisive and motivating factor to apply ABCD in implementation.

### ***6.3.4. Threats***

To succeed with the ABCD approach, the knowledge and quality of the leaders and experts in projects will affect directly the evaluation, analysis, planning and success of the strategic programmes, and also the implementation control. However, currently, the training programs are separate, inconsistent, and not yet thorough in different levels from executives to leaders. Additionally, the approach with community resources is limited, because mostly in Son La, the local people are ethnic minority, hence, having said that, their level and knowledge about ABCD, is not sufficient to implement in fields such as the economy or tourism. Furthermore, the route to approaching authorities for help is complicated. For these reasons, the support of the government and leaders is necessary for the success of the ABCD approach.

## **6.4. Full stages of applying ABCD approach**

As outlined in chapter two, ABCD was first launched in a Southern province in Vietnam, An Giang province (Vinh and Vinh 2012). The approach was introduced in Son La province in 2012 (EP03; EP02; PO04). Therefore, some of the province officers and researchers at Tay Bac university were articulating the terms ‘assets’ and ‘ABCD’ from that time. However, the local residents and commune officers are quite different, they are more familiar with the need-based or top-down approach to poverty alleviation and community development which was outlined in chapter one.. This section will examine the understanding of the participants during the interviews and FGDs about asset-based approaches to the poverty reduction process in their areas.

### ***6.4.1 Asset-based approach in term of ABCD***

Many discussions and interviews, both individual and group, have been held with the local residents in five chosen communes, regarding the use of the term ‘asset’. According to Vinh and Vinh (2012), in Vietnamese, ‘asset’ refers to the words “*tài sản*”, “*nguồn lực*”, “*vốn của cộng đồng*”. These translations are quite different from the definition given by McKnight and Kretzmann(1993) and Mathie and Cunningham (2008), which results in misunderstanding in implementing development plans. Therefore, during the interviews and FGDs, the researchers always tried to give chance to participants to find an appropriate personal definition of ‘assets in Vietnamse and their own language’<sup>11</sup>. The perception of this often changed significantly during the conversation. Thus, before the conversation, it was often thought:

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<sup>11</sup> As mentioned in chapter 3 of methodology, each ethnic minority in Son La province has their own language and difference from Vietnamse.

*I think my family have nothing to contribute and cannot escape of our situation by ourselves. We have no assets, no savings like other families (LR11).*

Another villager added:

*When you first came, I thought and asked myself “which help is the civil servant 12 bringing to the communes and poor households here” (LR26).*

Many respondents considered that: assets were money, therefore when they have no savings they thought that they do not have assets. This opinion also was stated by many other residents (LR08; LR32; LR16). Thus, on their mind, assets only carry a limited implication associated with monetary value. It was originally difficult and confusing for the participants to shift from the expectation that someone from outside will bring the help that they need to address their problems, to an understanding that many of the community's needs could be fulfilled by the assets, skills and resources already existing in the community. After the conversation, many of them changed their perception from the original and they thought that even though there were often only limited resources in their community, they could help to improve their living condition and address the poverty issue in a sustainable manner. They also recognised that there were many different types of assets available in their commune that could assist the community with many of their needs:

*Now, I realized that our talents and skills within the community also are assets. This types of asset could help us less depend on the outside help and the help inside the commune is very important (LR26)*

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<sup>12</sup>Because I used the introduction letter from the local governments (at province level) to conduct the research in the chosen sites (introduce as province officers in the first fieldwork).

Participants from FGDs02 and GFDs01 added:

*At the beginning, I was confused and not sure but step by step, I realized that we can use the help, which is existing in the community, to help ourselves (FGDs02).*

*At the beginning of the meeting, I did not realize that people in our village can help themselves, but after the conversation with you, all of us feel more confident about ourselves and we think many of us do not have to rely on the support of the government. We know what we can do for ourselves. We think we had nothing and we can not help ourselves but now we think we have a lot (FGDs01).*

They also reported feeling happy about the realization that there are many skills, resources and talents in their commune, their villages as assets:

*I am very happy to realize that we have many assets within our community and they can contribute to increase our income in the future (LR26).*

Even with the civil servants at province level, their perception also underwent significant change after attending a training session about ABCD in Son La in 2012 (Vinh and Vinh 2012). After finishing the fieldwork and having a comparison about understanding of assets between the participants, it could be concluded that according to the view of the participants, particularly during the interviews with experts and province officers in Son La province, ‘assets’ is understood in Vietnamese as “*nguồn nội lực*”. It seems a more meaningful translation and interpretation and should be broader to the concept of McKnight and Kretzmann (1993) and Mathie and Cunningham (2008).

#### ***6.4.2. Identifying the community assets***

According to McKnight and Kretzmann (1993) and also proven in the research of Shin et al. (2014), the ABCD approach has three steps to achieve the development of the capacity of the community. They are identifying the community assets, mapping the precise assets of the community fully and mobilizing the resources and assets within the community in order to make them available to work toward the positive change. As a development and poverty reduction approach, ABCD starts with the process of identifying the existing assets, skills, strengths and capacities, typical for each community and it pays more attention to the traditional values of indigenous, local organizations and institutions. The identifying and mapping of assets is considered the most important stage to start any ABCD programme (Wua and Pearcea 2013). It is exogenous resources of each community play the most important role in overcoming poverty or economic recession (Beaulieu, 2002, cited by Wua and Pearcea, 2013), so if a poverty-fighting-battle can pay more attention on reinforcing internal assets typical for each community, it should be the best way to escape from poverty sustainably (Ssewamala et al., 2010). As McKnight and Block (2011: 22) say: ‘How can you know what you need if you don’t know what you have ?’. This study, as mentioned in chapters two and four, will emphasize that identifying and mapping assets in a specific research site is the beginning point of adopting an ABCD approach to poverty reduction in Son La province. ‘Assets’, which are mapped in this section, are “*nguồn nội lực*” as analysed in section 6.2.1.

Goatting and Green (2010: 6) also found that there are different forms of assets, such as community capital, financial, physical, political, social, cultural and environmental capital. During analysis of the content of all the interviews and FGDs, combined with the information collected from the socio-economic development plans and reports in five chosen communes and the reports at the district and province level, as well as the reports on the effects of applying poverty

erosion programmes and regulations in Son La over the last few years, and the conversations with province officials, the categories of assets are defined. There are tangible and intangible assets in Son La province.

#### ***6.4.3. Mapping community assets in full***

After identifying five kinds of capital that are typical for the researched sites in Son La province, the researcher took the next essential step in ABCD approach, that is mapping these assets in the community in detail. This means that we have a responsibility to find out exactly what the capabilities in Son La are and how they associate with indigenous lives for a better understanding of the assets and people.

##### ***6.4.3.1. Natural capital***

Natural capital refers to things that exist for free in nature. They consist of soils, rocks, water (sea and fresh water), animals, plants, fossil fuels and minerals. These resources are the basis of life, on which humans and other life forms depend to survive and support their existence. All the above things are natural, not artificial, so humans can do nothing to create them. In other words, natural capitals occupy contingently and typically in different areas. Thus, after investigating in five chosen communes in Son La province, a finding was that among abundant kinds of natural capital, the most common resource that the inhabitants here count on is land, consisting of cultivatable land, forestland, and home plots.

##### ***Land***

'Land is an important asset for sustained poverty escapes and land-tenure policy reforms are needed to protect the poorest people from the loss of their land and to help them gain access to more land over time' (Strawson 2015:5). Some research has confirmed that while the distribution of land in 1993 was fairly equal, since this time ethnic minorities and poor households have been selling and mortgaging land at a much higher rate than the Kinh since the land was distributed. Such mortgaging and sales have typically been provoked by financial shocks or long-

term financial problems such as illness, accidents, crop failures and the build-up of household debts (Besemer 2012: 169). Access to land depends on each household's capacity for land reclamation and may change annually because of crop rotation (i.e. leaving land fallow for a period of time). In theory, all of the five chosen communes are not short of land given their population density. The poor area is at a disadvantage relative to the better-off, however, with respect to soil quality (SC02). Productive land possessed by the poor is often far from water sources, houses and roads, and is of a sloping and arid nature, which requires more labour to tend and yields lower output (LD02). Newlywed couples in particular, whose parents have no land to give them after their marriage, often have to reclaim 'arid' land in remote locations. Newly arriving households also face land related disadvantages, as all reclaimable land near to the water resources has usually been reclaimed by others (EP03; LD03; SC07). As the population grows and as resettlement arrangements delegated land to the Son La hydropower projects since the 2000s, the pressure on productive land in the poor and mountainous areas has intensified (UKAid et al. 2011; LD04; DO02; DO03). A few examples may serve to illustrate the evident land disadvantage of the poor relative to non-poor. The first is in the Khang Ethnic minority group at different villages in Chieng Bom commune. The households with more land are able to use the water supply of the irrigation system in the communes to grow two crops per year and consequently have a much better chance of escaping poverty than those who have less land and who depend upon unstable upland corn and casava crops in It Cang, Na Tam, Ban Tam, Ban Hom, Ban Trang village. The second example comes from the H'Mong group in Ta So 1, Ta So 2 villages in Chieng Hac commune. Some of them have no land (SC04). The primary reason being that their parents had no land for them to inherit or that they had to sell land to handle critical family circumstances (SC04; LR34; LR35). Among households with land, the poor ones typically have up to 1,400 square metres while the non-poor ones have at least 2,900 square metres



(SC04). Even within the same commune, the perceived importance of land acreage and quality varies between villages and between different ethnic groups. The result was illustrated in Phong Lai commune. The Kinh<sup>13</sup> and better-off households indicated that land acreage and quality were not the most important factor, which effect their income and standard of living. Rather, they consider health, trading commoldties and education of children as the most important factors (SC07; GFDs01; LR12; LR14).

The disadvantages experienced by ethnic minority households in using productive land has been recognised and the government has supported them by launching various ethnic-minority-benificial policies (UKAid et al. 2012; UKAid et al. 2011), such as decision No 755<sup>14</sup> which has been implemented in Son La since May 2013. However, progress has been slower than expected. The reason is the land-holding households are not willing to sell land, which makes it difficult to access good quality land while those who are willing to sell are often poor (the result contrary to the aim of the policy) (UBND 2015c; UBND 2015b). Programme 30a, targeting the 62 poorest districts, also promotes support policies on productive and forest land for poor ethnic minority household in five districts in Son La province (see chapter three).

### *Water*

From my experience of more than ten years working for local government in Son La, appraising construction projects, including the contruction project for poor groups and infrastructure projects, it has become clear no other regional or local governments provide a water supply in remote mountainous rural villages and ensure stable water resources for the whole year. This is always the biggest challenge for the people who plan construction projects in Son La. There are two

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<sup>13</sup> Majority group.

<sup>14</sup> Decision 755/QĐ-TTĐ about the government policy of supporting productive and residential land, drinking water for local ethnic minority households in the remote and difficult areas, signed by PM of Vietnam on 20<sup>th</sup>, May, 2013.

kinds of water resources - water for agricultural production, called irrigation and potable water systems.

*Potable water system (or clean water)*

Of all the five chosen communes, in Chieng Ngan about half of households had access to clean water from a water supply system in Son La city, Phong Lai and Chieng Hac commune have a government water supply with plastic composite pipes and raw filtered basins to some villages in the centre of the commune such as Kien Xuong, Dong Quan. The other villages still use water from natural resources, which is raw and untreated. No hamlets and villages in Chieng Bom and Nam Lau communes have the national water supply system. I had the chance to visit and check the quality of many rural water system projects (or gravity water system) that was invested in by NGOs, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank. We found that the quality of construction was not good, and they degraded quickly, with the raw filtered basins and pipelines system almost unusable after 2-3 years of construction. According to Mr Nhot – head of Khau Lay village in Phong Lai commune:

*Due to isolation, my village, like other remote mountainous rural villages, has no supply water invested by the government. This drinking water source comes from high slopes (“đồi” in Vietnamese). Some households, who are living too far from the water source, have to use bamboo pipe to take water from “water mines” (‘mó nước’ in local language), that are located in the mountain or in high slopes. For some richer households in the village, the water will be provided for clusters of households by building the shared holding tanks. Some households built the concrete water tanks to store the rainwater in the rainy season and used to cooking for whole year (LR14).*

In some villages, such as Ban Dun in Chieng Ngan commune, Kien Xuong, Dong

Quan, Thu Vu in Phong Lai commune, although the percentage of residents with access to clean water is high, the water is of poor quality. These water resources are potentially dangerous because of dead leaves, animal waste and plants. It can contain many kinds of bacteria. However, discussions with some residents in Lai Bay village in Phong Lai commune revealed that many people were very happy with this water source, they think it is safe and clean and they have used it for a long time (FGDs01; FGDs02; LR15; LR28). In all visited villages, the residents, both men and women, who were interviewed, felt satisfied with the water quality. The above examples show us that awareness of residents about the condition of their environment and cleanliness of their water is low. As the Head of an NGO working on clean water in this area noted:

*The major obstacle for development of clean water in my areas nowadays is to change the habits and perceptions of residents in terms of use and access to clean water for daily activities, especially cooking and drinking (LO06).*

The water which is supplied to households from a gravity system or rain water containers is only enough for a maximum of seven or eight months per year. There is still a shortage for 4-5 months in the dry season. Rain water tank capacity is sufficient for only a few months, and in dry months, residents have to go a long way to have a bath and a wash, or they have to walk 2-4 km from their house to collect clean water for daily activities such as cooking and drinking.

#### *Irrigation systems (or water for agriculture activities)*

In agricultural areas, irrigation water is a main resource for many productive and livelihood activities and it plays a key role in the poverty reduction process. (Hussain and Hanjra 2004: 4). The water source referred to above can only provide for drinking and is not sufficient for agricultural activities. But there is a big difference between remote communes and communes close to district or province centres, in terms of the convenience of drainage and irrigation systems. Due to poor

drainage and irrigation systems, the remote communes often have to face difficulties in agricultural production. Less than 50 per cent of communes in Son La have agricultural land with a fully irrigated system. Most of the residents in the five case studies communes said that they have a lack of water for cultivation, especially in the summer time. Unlike cultivation in the lowland areas, the ethnic farmers in the chosen communes have limited water supplies and they depend on the conserved amount of rain from the rainy season for their agricultural activities. There is a long tradition in the case study areas of growing agricultural trees, such as maize, cassava, and arrowroot. Farmers need to be free to choose the suitable methods and trees to cultivate. In the focus group in Nam Giat village, all the participants were keen to have a better irrigation system for agriculture from which they can cultivate diverse crops with higher efficiency and all of them believe that this is their biggest challenge for the reduction of poverty and, if overcome, it will help them improve their living standards.

### *Forest*

Within previous research, forestry was rarely mentioned as one of the key factors in the poverty reduction process (Wells-Dang 2012: 17; WorldBank 2009: 164; Cordone 2013). However, according to one Son La province official:

*Forests play an important role in the life of ethnic minority groups in Son La and other North West mountainous provinces. It is not only the resident area but also is the livelihood and also an important part of the spiritual life of ethnic minority groups (PO05).*

Research conducted by Sunderlin and Huynh (2005) did point out that ethnic minority groups in Vietnam tend to be concentrated in regions where the area is covered by forest. In my interviews and FGDs with residents and local officials, the results also show the same figures in some areas especially in the remote villages

such as Co Kiu, Ta Niet, Tong Han in Chieng Hac commune; Pom Khoang B in Chieng Bom commune; Ban Pe in Phong Lai commune; Ban Ban, Ban Bien in Nam Lau commune (SC01; SC03; SC04; SC05). The fact is that indigenous people, especially ethnic minority groups, have been living in forested areas for a long time, they tap into forest supply to support for their daily needs, yet this traditional living habit has been interrupted by government reforms. Nevertheless, despite strict central government prohibition, ethnic minority groups in Son La still lean on forests to maintain a livelihood today.

During my observations and interviews with the residents and households in the chosen communes, it became clear that in the past forestland and farmland were managed by a system based on customary law. However, since the 1970s, state agencies have managed land and forest in accordance with socialist principles. Under these reforms, both forest and agricultural lands have been either allotted to groups or individual households. Today, forest land still covers more than 45 per cent of total area (SLSO 2013: 12) and:

*They are often located in the poorest parts of the province and ethnic minority communities not only in the five chosen communes but also in the whole province are a greatly predominantly agricultural population and they depend much more on forest land than the majority group (Kinh) (PO04).*

According to the head of Nam Giat village in Phong Lai commune:

*The forest plays a particularly important role in remote ethnic minority family livelihood because of the diverse range of resources it supplies (PGDs01).*

Another resident added:

*Forest products such as bamboo, mushroom, firewood, honey, orchid, cardamom or the poles to make the 'pole house', is the only source of my extra income except agriculture. After the main harvest, when I have to wait in a few months for the next harvest, I go to the forest and gather these products since early morning and come back home very late during this period. If I am lucky to see honey or hunt wildlife animal, I can earn more than 100 thousand dong per day (£3). In the past, I could collect the firewood, bamboo shoots, honey, herbal and wildlife animals as many as possible, but now due to the government's current forest protection policies, it is banned. Although we know it is illegal but we have no choice. I have three children attending school. They need money to live and it is only way to earn more money to support for my family (LR15).*

In ethnic minority villages and communes such as Ban Pong, Cun Ten villages in Chieng Bom commune, Pha Lao, Phieng Luong in Phong Lai commune; Nam Tron village in Chieng Ngan commune; Huoi Kep, Huoi Xua villages in Nam Lau commune, the poor have much less forest land than the better-off (LR12; LR14; LR25; LR28; LR19). The main reason is because the previous forest land allocated programmes only prioritized households living in proximity to the forest who also had readily available labour and the knowledge and other capacities necessary to plant and nurture the forest. These often turned out to be better –off households or households led by village and commune cadres. Poor households, on the other hand, typically lacked information or did not have an adequate understanding of the long-term benefits of forest land through they have since become more interested in the benefits (PO02; PO05; EP04). Nevertheless, afforestation is actually an ideal poverty-reducing tool as these resources can provide long-term benefits to poor households.

#### *6.4.3.2. Social capital*

There are several definitions of what social capital is exactly. Social capital refers to any relationships, social activities with others, and virtual and viral networks between individuals, and other associations. (Scoones 1998: 8). Bramley and Besemer (2011) also defined the linkage between individuals as social capital. They recorded that humans are meant to live gregariously; thus, they feel safer when they are a part of some common activities in society, which may take various forms including formal relationships, such as employment and political participation and also informal activities, such as volunteering.

As outlined in chapter three, over 86 per cent of the population in Son La province are ethnic minorities. Like ethnicities in other regions of Vietnam, ethnic minority groups in Son La such as Thai Den and H'Mong often rely on community relationships and informal networks. The poor households observed were able to borrow food or petty cash from other villagers when in need (SC05). Some villages in all five communes continue the practice of contributing to a common fund which lends to poor households in need or support those with sick members. There is also a common practice of contributing labour, construction materials and money to repair or build small infrastructural facilities that bring benefit to the whole village or commune.

Family relations also play an essential role in the lives of the poor households. The poorest households of an extended family often receive small food grants from relatives to survive during the most difficult period prior to crop harvest and help to renovate their house and prepare the soil (LR16; LR28; LR08; LR34). The head members are often the most influential individuals in the extended family. They also play a role in encouraging learning, and getting the children of the poor families into school.

Labour exchange within a small group is also a significant factor in poverty reduction and beneficial to the poor, given that a lack of labour is typical of the poor ((UKAid et al. 2012; SC07). One of the typical examples is the labour exchange groups among the green tea and coffee growers in Kien Xuong villages, Phong Lai commune:

*During last week, all of my family (5 people) came to help Miss Thuy Binh's family to harvest "green tea leaves" on her field. We finished after 4 days while if only her family, they need at least 2 weeks to finish it. Next week her family will come and help us to harvest on our field (LR13).*

Another example is among cassava harvesters in Ta So villages in Chieng Hac communes. They did the same as in Phong Lai commune (LR35).

In most villages, a large proportion of the poor are employed in casual jobs or work away from home in informal sectors. For this, networking is very essential:

*Poor people in It Cuong villages are typically landless. I think over 90 per cent of the villagers mainly work in local casual jobs or work away from home in the "thị trấn"<sup>15</sup> to earn money and only come back home in the night time (LR25).*

And:

*In Chieng Ngan, the Black Thai people working as construction-workers. They often form "groups" five to 20 people, who are neighbours or relatives to help ensure stable employment (SC02).*

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<sup>15</sup> The centre of Thuan Chau district.



#### 6.4.3.3. *Financial capital*

According to Nguyen (2013), financial capital is paper-money, savings, credit, bond and any kinds of financial assets. It is distinguished from money spent on daily stipends, the amount of money pouring into investments to earn interest is financial capital. This can include basic infrastructural investment, issued bonds, loans, and fixed assets and technology applied in the production process. However, financial assets are not often familiar to the poor and ethnic minority groups that are our focus in this project. Therefore, this segment will discuss the common financial capital in Son La province, such as cash, savings, and commercial infrastructure that directly impact upon poverty reduction in the research areas. As analysed in previous chapters, the living condition of residents has obviously been enhanced recently, nevertheless, the real living condition of ethnic minorities has been enhanced at a lower pace than has been the case for the ethnic majority. Poverty is still the main issue that prevents the development growth of Son La province in general and poverty rate reduction in ethnic minority groups in particular. The lack of finance prevents the local government from conducting the new poverty reduction approach and model (UBND 2015d; UBND, 2015c; Son La's People's Committee 2013).

Cash, savings and debt are the most common and essential things for the poor in terms of influencing how much they could pay for education, productive machines and the purchase of new advanced technology. It is noticeable that all the participants in the interviews and FGDs considered financial capital to be a key issue to address the poverty reduction problems in their areas. Indeed, whenever we had a conversation about the solution to address poverty, financial capital was mentioned as the toughest obstacle that prevents them from escaping poverty. As conversations with interviewees developed, financial difficulties were highlighted more than often:

*We have to get enough money to invest to buy the tractors. If not, the*

*productivity has increased, and we can improve of living condition much better than now (FGDs01).*

Most villagers, particularly who are on the poor list of the province, acknowledged that in order to reduce poverty sustainably they need an initial investment to equip themselves with their livestock, planting and farming, and forest plans. However, most of them could not even seek suitable loans:

*I think more than 95 per cent of the population in our commune wished to ask for financial support and stated that they lack money to invest in their livelihood (SC03).*

Therefore, it is easier to understand why we do not categorize them but EM groups themselves admit they are the poor in society (DO02).

#### *6.4.3.4. Physical capital*

Physical capital consists of tangible infrastructure - banks, retail chains, educational institutions, transport systems, buildings and other subsidiary machines and facilities. This content was evaluated and analysed in the previous chapter.

First and foremost amongst physical capital is housing. A large number of households live in temporary housing in the chosen sites, over 80 per cent in Phong Lai commune (SC06); around 50 per cent in Chieng Ngan commune (SC02); 70 per cent in Chieng Hac and almost 90 per cent in Nam Lau and Chieng Bom commune (SC01, SC02, SC05). The house is divided into four groups: no house; semi-stable (*nhà bán kiên cố*); temporary (*nhà tạm bợ*) and permanent (*nhà kiên cố*) as in decision No 167 of Prime Minister (see more in sections 5.2 and 5.3 in Chapter five).

A pole-house or ‘stilt-house’ is common in almost all ethnic minority groups in Vietnam in general and Son La in particular, except H’Mong group. Pole-house buildings use a lot of recycled components which increase the instability of the house. However, the capacities of such houses need no comments. It should be very dangerous to live in such easy-to-cool-down houses, especially in the winter and without heat from fires. According to Besemer (2012), the government of Vietnam has drastically improved the density and quality of the infrastructure system, such as the road network, water system and irrigation system in the last decade through many national programmes and policies. The World Bank also sponsored an infrastructure plan of upgrading 1,800 transportation routes within 40 provinces nationwide from 2000 to 2006 (Minh 2007). Some researchers claim that there has been no corruption in the implementation of poverty reduction programmes and projects (Minh 2007), however, the results of our fieldwork here contradicted this. Many participants told me that ‘corruption in these programmes was a matter of fact’.

#### *6.4.3.5. Human capital*

Human capital is the human capabilities including abilities, skills, knowledge, especially those acquired through investment in general education and vocational training, as well as the physical condition. Human capital is considered to contribute to the success of different strategies (Scoones 1998, cited by Nguyen 2013). Human capital has an important role to play in increasing economic efficiency and poverty reduction (Vietnam 2016). An ability to use a certain skill set to transform raw materials to final products or know-how also refers to human capital (Almendarez 2010). Therefore, human capital is very important factor for poverty reduction and sustainable economic development (Son La People’s Committee 2013).

The concept of human capital is almost clear; however, different disciplines require different individual talents, skills and knowledge so it is difficult to measure which

talent is essential or that which is not relevant. There were some universal ways to measure human capital suggested by Son (2010), such as school enrolment rates, literacy rates and years of schooling. In this study, human capital will be measured mainly by the education level index through the interviews, FGDs with residents and officers, as well as through the observation and official reports of Son La province People's Committee<sup>16</sup>. In addition, this section also examines the traditional potential skills of residents such as the brocades and so on as human capital of research areas which could provide a wider understanding of untapped assets in the chosen communes.

Education always plays an important role, not only in an individual's prosperity and mobility, but also the advancement of communities. It has often been identified as a key, positive factor in the reduction of poverty (Quibria 1993; Rahman and Hossain 1995). Education can help improve the standard of rural residential conditions by increasing income through improving skills, knowledge, health and nutrition as well as developing the ability to adopt and implement technology in the farming and daily sectors. But like other provinces in Vietnam, the illiteracy rate for the ethnic minority groups in Son La is still high (SLSO 2013):

*Illiteracy rate of ethnic minority groups has been steadily decreasing in Thuan Chau in particular and whole province in general but still high compared with other provinces. From 2000s up to now, illiteracy rate was reduced by more than half, it was reduced nearly two-third. Even the illiteracy rate for ethnic minority groups was higher than that of majority group in the past however the gap seems to be narrowing over time (LD04).*

And:

*In terms of education, there is an increasing trend in number of household*

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<sup>16</sup> Some details already analysed in chapter 5.

*heads completing primary school, while the number of household head finishing secondary school and higher education are decreasing. This is one of the main reasons to explain for the slow pace of the poor's movement out of agriculture in the EM in Son La and it is evidenced by the percentage of poor households working on farms have dropped very slowly (PO05).*

A summary of almost all interviewees' statements reveals a reality that the more illiterate a household is, the poorer situation they suffer. In Son La, the percentage of unfinished primary school and total illiteracy is more than 80 per cent, these households are also listed on the poorest list and always in food shortages. On the contrary, for 16.5 per cent of households whose education are secondary school or above, they are not poor (Son La People's Committee 2013).

During the period of conducting fieldwork in Nam Lau commune, when I came to Sanh Pai primary school, even though the distance from commune centre to school is only 30 km it took me three hours by motor bike. When I spoke with the leader of the village, the 50-year- old man said:

*The children, who are learning in kindergarten and primary school, have to walk an average 12 km from village to school. They have to wake up at 5 am, spent 2 hours walking to school and come back home after lunch time regardless of rain or sunny day. On heavily rainy days they miss school because the road is too slippery and dirty. Thus, many children in our and surrounding villages will drop out of school or stop when they know how to read, how to write. (LR30)*



***Picture 6.2: Teachers have to pass the muddy roads, streams to teach pupils in Hua La secondary school, Pua Nhot villages, Hua La commune, Son La city.***

*Sources: <http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/giao-duc/nhung-nguoi-thay-loi-bun-ngap-cang-chan-di-day-3111421.html>.*

I also contacted one of the most powerful people in Phong Lai commune and visited some of schools in his commune following an earlier invitation. In a position of a leader of the commune, he confidently stated his opinion and shared his standpoint of human quality in his commune. He affirmed that:

*A large proportion of our population have skills and ability, their children went to school with very high enrolment number. We have enough classes and teachers for all children, at least at primary school level (SC06).*

However, after ten-years experience of working in Son La province as a civil servant at province level, I would suggest that this is the inevitable standpoint of a politician, he must be in charge of providing positive information to calm the commune and prevent any unexpected troubles from the people's committee. From our FGDs and interviews with the residents, plus the participant observations, we have reason to believe that the quality of human capital in all five chosen communes is not high:

*In general, the residents in our village lack of many livelihood skills and knowledge. Many families depend on the natural resources which are becoming exhausted compared with the past ten years and are also prohibited. I think, the centre government should have a special care for us. Thus, in order to have better skills and be able to change the current living condition, villagers are encouraged to participate in training classes (LR12).*

Another added:

*Only few of us were vocationally trained. But they moved to the district and Son La city to work. Our generation have no knowledge because we left school too early. But we hope next generation will have skills and knowledge to apply the new technology in the cultivation (LR22).*

*Many of residents recognise their skill in making traditional brocades and crafts. In fact, local residents in our commune have already sought for ways*

*to promote the community's strengths. Possessing the special abilities, villagers in Phong Lai commune held some handicraft workshops on working crafts or carpenter (tho moc) to guests and tourists. We prefer sharing our skills.*

Regardless of their educational level, most of the local residents, who are not only poor households, said that they were unable to produce high quality agricultural products. Indeed, for rice, the most important and popular consumption good in all Vietnamese families, many of households in this study preferred not to eat the rice produced in Son La province. They thought that the quality of Thai rice and the rice from Dien Bien or Southern of Vietnam was higher:

*I bought Dien Bien or Thai imported rice for my own consumption (LR16).*

As UNESCO (2011) indicated, a higher education ensures better earning and a healthier health. The more a community is educated, the better life condition they can enjoy. The role of education in poverty reduction is also defined in the socio-economic development plans of Son La province (UBND 2015d; UBND 2015e). The province identifies the importance of investing in higher education for the next generation. It is the most important task of the authorities to train the people with general and inclusive knowledge, skills and ability to be creative and flexible.

Conversations with EM residents during the fieldtrips indicate that language misunderstanding poses a major barrier in the villager's ability to access available information channels and take part in the local decision-making processes. Taking H'Mong group as an example, even though some official organizations such as Women's Union or local authorities want to take care more about them and expand society-development programs in here, they still face a lot of difficulties in language difference which is hard to overcome.



#### ***6.4.4. Mobilizing the resources and assets of local community***

The final stage of an ABCD approach is to publicize available resources and assets to residents who are stakeholders thereby turning them into effective, powerful and efficient poverty erasure tools. It is clear that it is people who must take control of social change. No matter how similar an asset may seem by name or label, each area has its own unique features that make it distinctive. Thus, an approach that exploits the sole capitals of a locality might be the smartest, cheapest and most sustainable method. However, as suggested earlier, theory is an incomplete part of the process. If the stakeholders do not believe in it, nothing is going to change.

Our conversations with the local residents revealed respondents limited understanding and knowledge of ABCD:

*No, it is the first time I have heard of ABCD, but its approach that you are telling me seems familiar with something we are doing here (LR32).*

The majority of poverty reduction programmes and projects, which have been implemented, were not initiated specifically as an ABCD approach, but some certainly worked intentionally from a strengths-based perspective:

*Looking at things from the perspective of what we have not rather what we need and what we lacking, it seems to be an asset-based approach as your introduction (PO01).*

Interestingly the term of ABCD is unfamiliar with many NGO officers and some province officers, except a Specialist of the People's Committee of Son La<sup>17</sup>, but

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<sup>17</sup> He did the master about international development in USA in 2011.

NGOs officers and province officers are aware of basic principles of this approach:

*I personally do not have a full understanding of what ABCD is. However, by the sound of it, it should be a priority for some pilot poverty reduction model in our province since 2010, such as developing the goat in Quynh Nhai<sup>18</sup> district, or growing fish in Da river in Muong La<sup>19</sup>... These models actually looked at some essential skills that are necessary to local development and investigate the attempt of the locals (PO05).*

In addition, the conversation with the leader of Phong Lai commune highlighted that while he had never heard of the ‘ABCD’ approach, a similar approach was in fact adopted in his commune and the objective was to help the residents, particularly poor households, to reduce dependence and they had many positive results and helped the local residents to reduce dependency:

*In poverty reduction programmes and policies, we support poor households through health, education programmes, working collaboratively with the centre government. The main objective is to use the skills and knowledge of local residents that are working there in order to utilise the local human resource as well as to improve indigenous engagement in local affairs instead of hiring external experts who are unfamiliar with local condition (PO08).*

He also pointed out that the term ABCD actually did not reach community level. He said that he did not have a clear understanding of ABCD; however, through introduction and explanation about ABCD in the conversation, he thought it should be a priority of his village to address the poverty and social problems in the area. However,

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<sup>18</sup> A district of Son La province

<sup>19</sup> A district of Son La province

with one researcher, who are working at Tay Bac University in Son La province and a specialist of Son La's People's Committee, they were aware of ABCD, and had attended some training sessions (EP01; PO05):

*I have heard about it for a few years and read some documents related to this approach. I also attended a ABCD training in Hanoi, organised by Ministry of Rural Agriculture and Development in 2012 but do not read any research about this. In my opinion, I think it is a good and suitable approach for Son La (PO05).*

Some of the above opinions show that not only do residents do not quite understand the asset-based community development approach, but also the government officers. Researchers in Son La province do not understand fully the principles of ABCD. However, it could be understandable because according to Hopkins and Rippon:

*While the idea of asset-based approaches has been around in some shape or form for nearly 50 years, the fact is that people are still learning about it (2015: 18).*

As the increasing importance of an ABCD approach to deal with poverty in many areas has been argued and agreed by the key stake holders in the fight against poverty, there is an acknowledgement that progress to solve the root of poverty must derive from internal factors rather than external ones. In the face-to-face interviews with some of province officers, they said that:

*Giving the poor households full subsidies has never been an effective approach because it often creates 'dependence attitude' from local residents. They think that above subsidies are 'the gifts of God' therefore they do not want to lose their 'privileged' status and want to be in the poor list forever.*

He mentioned:

*It is much better to spend that money on teaching them 'how to fish instead of giving them the fish'. This means that we should spend money on vocational or technical training instead of direct support. When the poor residents have good knowledge, skills, they will escape of poverty by themselves and it is a sustainable way.*

Another province officer pointed out:

*The more the government continues to subsidise poor households such as money transfers, cattle, food staple, the longer poor will depend on supports of government, the longer poverty will occur and the more number of households will increase (SC07).*

From above interview results, one thing to point out is that exogenous skills and knowledge of local residents are even more important than how much fund provided to them. To explain this statement the next chapter will take some successful models in poverty reduction in cases to approve the importance of ABCD approach to ease the poor.

## **6.5. Dicussion**

In earlier sections, we talked of the increasing number of participants of local residents in the poverty reduction programmes and policies within both inner and outer provinces in the last few years. Taking Son La province as an example, some recent official reports of the local government<sup>20</sup> show that those most at risk of being poor are ethnic minority communities. Most of them inhabit areas far from the road network.

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<sup>20</sup>Son La Province People's Committee

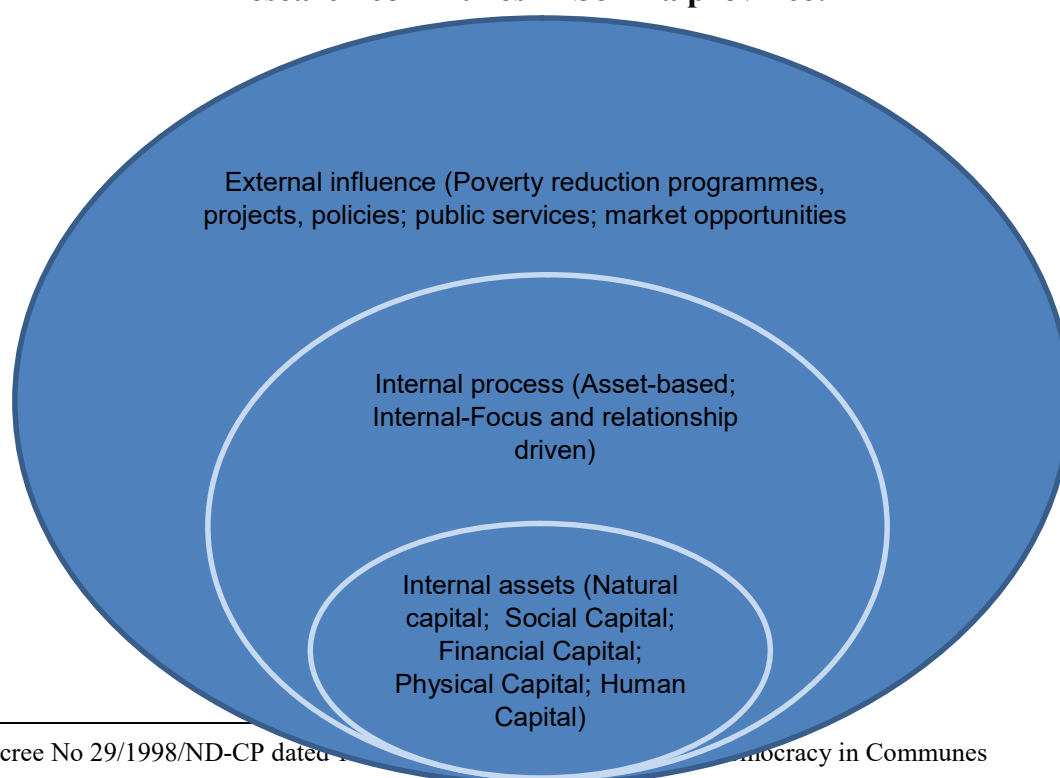
### ***6.5.1. The effect of ABCD approach compared with previous approaches***

#### **An urgent need to change the poverty approach**

While selling land and direct supports from government poverty reduction programmes may relieve immediately the number of poor households, it is far from the best way to escape from poverty sustainably. In research areas, it is believed that there is an unbreakable firm link between poverty and landlessness.

According to decree 29/1998/ND-CP<sup>21</sup>, in order to increase democracy among the Party and authorities, a government initiative has been held at the commune level since 1998. With ideas in these meetings, local residents in communities have the opportunities to take part in the decision-making process. However, through our above analysis, there are three main factors at different levels that contribute to poverty reduction progress in Son La province. They are: (1) Internal assets; (2) Internal process; (3) External influence. (Figure 6.2).

**Figure 6.1: Framework of successful poverty reduction stories in five chosen research communes in Son La province:**



<sup>21</sup> Decree No 29/1998/ND-CP dated 19/05/1998 on the promotion of Democracy in Communes

So, the mechanism is clear. In order to reduce the poor rate, if we spend no effort on shifting government policies - an external influence, like what has been tried by former programmes, it is far from destroying root and branch of poverty. In contrast, raising public awareness about internal assets and persuading ordinary people to develop fully their natural capital, facilitate internal process, and/ or co-ordinate with a favourable external environment, as the ABCD approach advocates, will be a more successful method.. Additionally, as fiercely as we want to erase the poor rate, as quickly we must shift to ABCD.

#### ***6.5.2. The importance of leaders and government in the ABCD poverty reduction approach***

Local government is one of the key players in the poverty reduction process. Government brings the resources and also brings the ideas. As a province officer said, ‘engagement and dialogue are always helpful’. Collaboration between the grass-roots and top authority officials is very important. Thus, as more conversations are held, the more effective this collaboration can be. Again, a province officer:

*At village levels, the residents get a bit stuck, they have got their own village and village land, they have some sort of authority of the village and then we have the state. So they do not often work well together. The only way it is going to work is to have collaboration across two – village and government. Showing the value in those ‘bottom-up approaches means that communes are better equipped to engage with government constructively.*

## **6.6. Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the utilization of local assets and the relationship between socio-economic status and assets utilization in 5 chosen communes in Son La province, Vietnam. It is a common phenomenon that most of the local residents were aware of the need of utilizing the assets within the community to fight against poverty, and had clear opinions about the very positive effects of using the local assets during the poverty reduction progress. The participants stated positively about poverty reduction results when harnessing the assets within their community. They were also aware of the asset resources inside their community, but had a limited vision to foresee feasible livelihood strategies without outside support and a difficulty in envisaging how they might adapt to an ever-changing economic climate. Moreover, it is widely recognised that the quality of these assets and natural/social/economic capital in the areas with a high concentration of EM communities is lower than the average provincewide. (UBND 2015d; UBND 2015c). We now move on to an overall discussion of our findings, which is simultaneously a concluding chapter to the thesis.



## **CHAPTER 7**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

#### **7.1. Discussion**

The framework for a '*poverty reduction model*' begins with the perception of local residents concerning the matter. After many years of evolution, the needs of ethnic minorities have developed and now focus on obtaining a more satisfying life quality. This section will reflect upon the empirical findings of the thesis, with a view to answering the research questions outlined at the outset. The chapter has two major parts. The first part discusses the reality of the poverty reduction schemes in Son La province. The second part analyses the effectiveness, and remaining problems, of using ABCD to reduce poverty in Son La province.

##### ***7.1.1. Discussion of current poverty reduction in the research areas***

Generally speaking, the implementation of on-going poverty reduction programmes in Vietnam, and more specifically in Son La, has proposed remarkable issues to be discussed.

##### ***Overlapping policies***

An excess and overlapping combination of policies and programmes to reduce poverty has been applying in Son La province. Those who are directly and indirectly involved in poverty reduction programmes in Son La express the same idea on the intervention of the government in these programmes. They all feel that there has been some level of repetition in policies as well as in special programmes issued to tackle poverty in the province. The repetition appears in both the programmes themselves and the way they are implemented in provinces.

There is no doubt that the government policies and programmes have brought about significant contributions to the poor and ethnic minority people of Son La, and to the remote and difficult communes therein. However, the pace of change is slower than the average for the country (see chapter five). Currently, most approaches highlight weaknesses of ethnic groups and poor households and build policies from this understanding, without realizing that the underlying reason for their underdevelopment is mainly the huge gap that needs to be bridged between ethnic minorities and majorities. It is a striking fact that the contemporary poverty reduction policies have mostly focused on providing poor people with sufficient food, adequate housing, easy access to public services and essential infrastructure. This approach is definitely logical considering that the very basic needs for human beings, especially for ethnic groups who consistently live in under-standard conditions, should be the first priority. Yet, in the context of poverty reduction, further investigation is needed. In other words, besides meeting basic needs, poor people, particularly the EM households, should be guided on how to employ and take advantage of favourable regulations and provisions to improve their living value (Hung. et al.2011; Thinh, 2015). Unfortunately, only a few get to this view.

In order to ease the burning issue of a high rate of poverty, Vietnamese authorities have come up with different plans at different stages with the hope that the implementation of these plans can stimulate poverty reduction. However, implementers of these programmes are of the opinion that there is little connection between the programmes and plans issued, leading to confusion and repetition in the implementation process. To prove this point, a statistical summary has been conducted among those public poverty reduction guidelines and doctrines, which appears to be a complicated research considering the vast numbers of policies introduced. At the end of the study, which examines only a small proportion of the materials, it has been concluded that a typical policy related to poverty reduction consists of two government resolutions, 10 government decrees, 30 prime ministerial decisions and a lot of information released by other ministries. What is

surprising is that there are more than sixty policies with the same pattern mentioned above and the number may escalate with a deeper study. However, those policies overlap in terms of scope and beneficiaries. Table 8.1 will illustrate the overlapping of poverty policies and programmes which are being implemented in Son La.

***Table 7.1: Overlapping in sectors that are supported from the PR policies in Son La province.***

	<b>Communal houses, rural road system etc.</b>	<b>Production</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Water</b>	<b>Vocational training</b>	<b>Health</b>	<b>Education</b>
P135-Phrase 2	X	XX		X	X	X	XX
NEP-PR	X	XXXX	X		X	XX	XX
Resolution 30a	X	XXXXX	X	X	XX	X	XX
P134		X	X	X			
PR policies of the Son La province People's Committee		X			X	X	X
Other PR policies and programmes	XXX	XX	X			XX	XXX
Total:	7	15	4	3	5	7	10

*Source: Ministry of Labour, Invalid and Social affair in 2014, 2015 and reports of Son La Province People's Committee.*

Overlapping is a feature that can also be seen in the organization and management of those programmes. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in Son La province in

particular and Vietnam in general, DOLISA is assigned the task of supervising and monitoring most of the poverty reduction policies and programmes throughout. However, other functional departments such as the Committee for EM affaires (CEMA), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), the Department of Finance (DF), the Department of Planning and Investment (DPI), the Department of Health, the Department of Education and Training, the Department of Construction the Department of Transportation and the Bank of Social Policies are all partially involved in the management of implementation processes of poverty reduction programmes. The PPC is responsible for the allocation, utilization and management of all resources for poverty reduction purposes. As a result, DOLISA found it nearly impractical to coordinate these departments to work towards one single target because they were not given proper authority to influence other departments([EP03](#); [LD06](#); [UNDP, 2013](#)). This turns out to be a daunting challenge as the overlapping on the organizational side indicates a serious matter that can affect the whole poverty reduction campaign. To be specific; it could lead to tremendous loss of time and effort when there is no agreement and common understanding between parties. In this case, the poor are those who suffer most. One leader of province said:

*If you want to coordinate, you have to be provided with enough power, function and authority. If all of you are the same level, how can DOLISA coordinate others ? If they have not got enough power, they cannot. Thus, the organization of implementation will be the main point to solve this problem (LD03).*

One province officer also expressed a concern that the content of poverty reduction schemes and plans reflect conflicts among composers, the reason of which is that the whole document was separately written by various authors who come from different divisions, such as the Department of Planning and Investments and DOLISA, the Department of Education, Health and Agriculture and so on (PO02). It is understandable that documents will be inconsistent as each part is prepared

under a distinguished point of view without discussion and agreement. This accordingly results in repetition in beneficiaries:

*There are too many poverty reduction programmes at both central and local government and they struggle, they are not really well coordinated with each other. Each department designs their own plan, therefore some households can benefit from many different policies while some others have nothing though their condition is not much better (LD06).*

Although some local authorities at commune level ensure that their annual socio-economic development plan consists of anti-poverty policies and proper reference to necessary resources, there is still a long way to solve this issue (LD01; PO06). The level of consistency in poverty reduction programmes needs to be re-questioned, seeing that different minority groups, while the majority of them are in poverty, present distinctive characteristics in terms of culture, education level, mind-set and awareness of poverty. This means that public services such as basic infrastructure systems, and important physical assets like housing, landholding and so on should be provided differently considering these differences instead of trying to cater for ethnic groups in a general and uniform manner (see Chapter five). There is a certain level of neglect in terms of the variation in the needs of poor people from various groups. The results of some studies such as Hung. et al.([2011](#)), VN ([2013](#)) have also endorsed this interpretation. Therefore, narrowing the gap among ethnic group features and exercising agreement in planning poverty reduction programmes should be among the first priorities to ensure these schemes are effectively implemented.

Overlapping is not the only drawback of the poverty reduction programmes previously implemented throughout Son La province. During the research, the author has also uncovered some additional downsides in implementing these

programmes, such as the outdated means of measuring poverty and the factors that shape it, difficulties in applying the programmes in different ethnic groups, the delay in policy implementation and updates, the impracticality of many of the programmes, as well as some other minor issues that are going to be further discussed below.

### *Poverty line is low*

Countries in the same region as Vietnam, in South East Asia, have also endured high poverty rates at some stage in their history and can be regarded as suitable cases to benchmark. In countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines, average income is considered a key measurement of poverty; for example, if a person earns less than 22 USD per month, he/she will be categorized in a poverty group (Strawson 2015). The same amount is applied in the Philippines, with a poverty line of 24.4 USD/person/month. In the Vietnamese context, as mentioned in the previous chapter, a person is considered poor when s/he is unable to earn 500, 000 VND per month (£15.2) if s/he lives in a city and 400, 000 VND per month (£12.2) if s/he lives in the countryside. On average, this poverty threshold is equivalent to 0.51 £/per person/per day for urban areas and 0.4 £/per person/per day for rural areas. This displays a big gap in comparison with nations such as the Philippines or Indonesia and it appears to be somewhat unrealistic as Vietnam's economic condition is not of the same level as its counterparts in the region, which means that the poverty threshold should be higher and more poor people should be classified.

If the poverty line remains at a low threshold, it also means that an uncountable number of poor people are fighting fiercely and silently to earn a living without adequate support from poverty reduction programmes. Due to the fact that they earn more than the poverty line, they are not classified as poor households, they are the near-poor groups discussed in Chapter five. However, their earning is hardly high enough to be wiped out of the poverty list, there is just a small gap between their

earnings and the poverty line. If the poverty threshold is adjusted to a more reasonable rate, they may well qualify and benefit from poverty reduction schemes. This point also is recognised by both local and national reports ([UBND 2015a](#); [Bien 2016](#); [Son La People's Committee 2013](#); [MOLISA 2015](#) [Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs of Vietnam 2016](#)). However, due to the restriction in data collection and government policies, there is hardly a more reasonable approach of measuring poverty in Vietnam other than a low poverty line as discussed (PO03; LD05). To solve this problem, a thorough research should be conducted nationwide with a large scale of interviewers from various parts of the country to collect a comprehensive database that can be developed into a more feasible measuring index of poverty.

#### *Poverty reduction approaches amongst ethnic minority groups*

As reported in Chapter five, poverty is a frequent phenomenon amongst many ethnic minority groups in Son La province. Therefore, the question of how the poverty reduction policies can be tailored to all these groups in Son La is one of, if not, the main issue for an effective and sustainable poverty reduction process. Government documents report that current policies and programmes have mainly aimed at ensuring that the poor and ethnic minority people are provided with productive land, housing, access to public services and essential infrastructure. According to the results of research and an official report of MOLISA ([2015](#)), 79.21 per cent of the budget, which is allocated for the national target programmes and for poverty reduction, was spent on building infrastructure, meaning that other activities, such as investing in infrastructure for poverty reduction implementers, providing non-physical support for people in terms of education programmes, employment programmes and so on only take up less than 21 per cent of the total budget ([Dung and Cuong 2015](#)). There is no doubt that the role of infrastructure in a poverty reduction process is a significant one, however, too little attention has been paid, and intervention attempted, to ensure that poor households and ethnic minority

groups acquire the natural, social and cultural capital to take advantage of improved conditions to advance their living standards and escape poverty by themselves in a sustainable manner.

It is clear from our discussion thus far in this thesis that the twelve ethnic minority groups in Son La province have very different characteristics in terms of culture, customs and language. However, major poverty reduction programmes and policies have aimed to reduce poverty for ethnic minorities without distinguishing between individual EM groups. A ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to poverty reduction has been used without adequate attention to these differences. This approach has certain advantages as it ensures uniformity in the implementation process, particularly the communes and areas with mixed distribution of EM groups, but it crucially prevents the development of interventions that are responsive and sensitive to the distinct characteristics and needs of individual ethnic groups.

*Policy implementation and updates are too slow*

All national target programmes and policies for poverty reduction (PR) in Vietnam have been conducted at four levels - national, provincial, district and commune. At national level, MOLISA is assigned to manage almost all programmes of PR. Other functional ministries, such as the Committee for Ethnic Minorities Affairs (CEMA) and the Ministry of Agriculture also take part in the process. If the policies and programmes are introduced and then receive negative feedback from people who are directly involved in the process, the adjustment or revision of the policies is imperative, yet it is often time consuming – ‘normally 2-5 years at the centre level and 6 months to 2 years at the province level, 3 months to 1 year at district level’ (EP02), due to the prolonged waiting time for different levels of approval. During this time, market indexes have changed without warning, for example the rate of inflation may escalate enormously. In this sense, the poverty threshold surely fails to keep up with the pace of inflation. Because central government often calculates



the threshold which can be applied for a 5 year period, this means that in 2011 the poverty line is reasonable in that many poor people in the rural areas can be eligible for a rate of 400.000 VND per month, however, in 2015 everything has changed and this amount is just enough to cover the most basic needs such as enough rice and an electric bill. With changing conditions, the line then fails to reflect current poverty situations (PO03; SC05; LD07).

It is clear that the process of passing on information concerning poverty reduction from the highest level to the lowest level is often delayed. Once a policy regarding poverty reduction is fully drafted and reviewed thoroughly, it should be publicized with detailed guidance on how to execute the programmes effectively. However, most local implementers shared the view that a considerable amount of time usually elapses before the guidance to be published, meaning that during this blank period they have to resort to old regulations, which poses tremendous difficulties and also criticism among poor households for obsolete guidance. That is only the tip of the iceberg as the guidance also requires a certain amount of time and effort to fully deliver the content to direct executers to ensure they are fully aware of the implementation process. Budget allocation also delays the distribution of poverty funds to district and other low levels.

Due to the artificially low poverty threshold and the slow update of policy, the implementation process of poverty reduction has not been very clear and productive. A typical example happened in 2011 when all of the poor households, who had managed to escape from poverty since 2008, were again classified in poverty and received financial aid from the poverty reduction programmes and policies in the next period of 2011-2015. It is predictable that many of the households, who had escaped poverty since 2011, will then fall back to poverty concerning the new poverty threshold in the decision No. 1614/QD-TTg and No. 59/2015/QD-TTg, which has been applied since 2016 but contains hardly any adjustment in the poverty rate. It also means that the roots of poverty are not solved in an efficient manner (PO02; LD04; EP01).

*The assessment process does not reveal reality*

As discussed in Chapter five, the central government did not conduct an extensive evaluation of the impact of the PR policies and programmes nationwide. The evaluation is mostly based on reports submitted by local authorities at province levels, those who are directly in charge of implementing the poverty reduction policies and programmes. What is surprising is that the accuracy and details of the statistics need to be questioned, as the outcome of the reports are mostly general numbers in terms of finance, employment and health care support without pertinent information to reveal the level in which living standards of poor households have improved since the implementation of these policies. Instead, the reports on poverty reduction programmes often consist of a quite redundant part, which is a list of achievements of local authorities, along with financial recommendations for the next periods (PO03; PO04). A researcher added:

*In fact, due to the 'achievement obsession', in all of the evaluation reports, local authorities only want to describe the improvements of living conditions of the poor households and the achievements of the PR policies and try to hide the limitations. Thus, these reports are not accurate as the origin of data given and method of evaluating them are under question (EP04).*

However, recently, there have been some certain changes in the evaluation of these programmes.

*Current policies are not well rounded and unreasonable*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, under the poverty reduction programmes and Vietnamese law, primary education in Vietnam in general and Son La province in particular is free of charge for children, especially poor children whose parents are unable to afford the education fee. On the contrary, the fact is that besides conventional study fee, parents also have to cover numerous additional fees that are

not officially stated, such as uniforms, textbooks, facilities maintenance and even additional tuition fees. The total sum of the education cost indicates an uphill battle even for parents of middle income, let alone households in poverty. The same problems can be seen in public health care services, considering that insurance cards are operated in a complicated manner yet prove to be less effective and beneficial than they are supposed to. Apart from the discussion of poverty reduction limitations mentioned above, there are less significant matters concerning the policy implementation of ABCD, among which the author would like to present the lack of flexibility of the policies, the lack of resources as well as the leakage of assets during execution.

The current policies can also be seen as underdeveloped and not well-rounded (CO03; LD06) due to the fact that not all poor people, for example the disabled, the elderly and underprivileged children benefit from these programmes. A typical example is the loan policy which is applied by The Bank of Social Policies. Under the policy, those people are still requested to demonstrate their condition as well as to provide evidences in order to be eligible for a bank loan. These groups lack essential qualities, such as health condition, education level or experience, to qualify for a loan or to own a business of some kind ([Tung, 2015](#)). Furthermore, it is a common thought among directly involved people that resources provision for the campaign often experience shortage in various aspects, namely, human resources as well as financial support. This deficiency undoubtedly delays the efficiency of the process because resources are one of the determining factors in the success of policy implementation.

Another feature that needs to be mentioned refers to the unavoidable waste of resources during implementation. It is a fact that most poverty reduction programmes restrict the support to a certain group of beneficiaries, often the poorest and most miserable households are classified to be granted with resources provision from the government. However, due to the difficulties in controlling and classifying

beneficiaries, a leakage of resources, mostly physical resources like funding, are unavoidable. According to people who are directly in charge of delegating resources, the rate of leakage is quite high and could result from two main reasons: errors in categorizing the level of poverty that is eligible for government subsidy; misconduct by immediate leaders of the project. ([SL 2015; PO03; LR12](#)).

### ***7.1.2. ABCD in Poverty reduction in Son La province context***

Poverty reduction in the context of Son La, as discussed in previous chapters (chapters five and six), presents a conventional pattern that is quite popular among South-East Asian nations, where the government plays a major role in the decision making process concerning poverty programmes implementation. Local implementers and poor households have played a strikingly minor part in decision making within the poverty reduction process. This section aims to discover the difficulties in applying ABCD, and the extent to which ABCD is applied, as well as inviting development opportunities for beneficiaries during the research process – an example of action research. This section and section 7.2.2 addresses research question 3: *How can ABCD be considered a potential mechanism for poverty reduction approach in the Son La context ?* In short, this section provides a full detail of factors contributing to ABCD assertion in Son La province.

#### ***The enhancement of poverty reduction progress***

The findings of Chapters five and six indicate another view of poverty reduction programmes besides the recognition of certain success in the implementation. The perspective is that communal authorities need to engage considerably from the scratch of poverty reduction schemes before moving to a more neutral position. However, it should not be misread that governmental support accounts for most part of the implementation, seeing that in Son La province, the existence of conventional features may be the determining factor in poverty reduction process.

To make it clear, ABCD is a method that does not merely focus on human resource factors – more than that, it focusses on the needs of citizens ([Mathie and Cunningham 2003](#)). It is imperative to restate the research produced by Hoe and Tuan ([2008](#)) that there should be a more flexible view of asset definition. During this study, assets are summarized as natural, social, physical and also financial potentials that can be made use of to form tools that can assist the poverty reduction process. Direct implementers of the poverty reduction campaign are urged to absorb the essence of these assets to change poor people's mindset and stimulate them to respond actively in these programmes. Of course, poor households are unable to recognize or form any actions without being introduced to any of these assets. As mentioned in Chapter six, the utilization of community assets is an important factor for poverty reduction progress in any areas. However, the results of the analysis show that the internal assets within the community in Son La province, particularly in EM groups and remote villages, have not been actively employed by local residents and local authorities as well. Several social-economic development plans and projects are currently being proposed by local authorities and even international non profit organizations, however they are not founded on the most important factors which are to fully utilize internal resources or assets within the community, instead of addressing community needs ([Bien, 2016](#), [UBND, 2015c](#), [UBND, 2015b](#)).

What surprised the researcher is the fact that most interviewees in the survey during the research appeared to be somehow aware of their own assets. As mentioned in Chapter six, it seems that most local residents and poor people had not heard of the term 'ABCD'; only government officials at province, district levels and some at commune level grasped a vague perception of this term without fully understanding its essence. In this circumstance, the study shows that, local residents and authorities have resorted to guidance and assistance from central governments and maintain a combination between additional support with existing resources or assets, as addressed in some other countries by Phillips and H.Pittman ([2009](#)). Some

statements indicate a situation where local residents and poor households correlate strongly with each other with a view to satisfy a shared purpose. As proven in previous chapters, traditional customs of ethnic minorities in Son La province have ‘high community spiritual value’. One participant explained why villagers want to attend and contribute to these projects:

*We speak the same language with the same traditional customs. The most important thing is that we cook and share traditional food or sing ancient songs while or after working. Under the ego, we can live side by side for a long time (LR15).*

This statement expresses a situation where mutual belief is the deciding factor in coordination. Furthermore, the group works are well-arranged and well-supervised by the leader of the villagers or communes through discipline, unity and respect (PO03). One leader of village in Chieng Bom commune explained:

*There were proper procedures and arrangements for poverty reduction and completing the infrastructure systems in which all members of the village participated. However, no one is willing to be penalized.*

However, the results of the research shows some downsides in the characteristics of the schemes, among which the most concerning matter relates to willingness. The reason why cooperation between parties was so smooth is that the majority of people would do anything they are obliged to in order to avoid being punished or reprimanded, which leads to a consequence that engagement in group work is often the outcome of negative factors instead of positive ones. Nonetheless, the finding of the research also points out a reality that even local authorities are reliant upon their mere efforts in improving the living standard and poverty reduction rate in their areas by using the resources within communes. Aligning with other research results,

it is proven in this case that local authorities could perform more remarkably in their interaction with lower subordinates as well as people in poverty. In reality, it is almost a fact that the locally driven approach is viewed by governmental implementers as a daunting challenge or a burden in implementing poverty reduction schemes instead of a positive attitude existing towards this method. They possess the conventional view that poor local residents, particularly ethnic minority groups, are not 'knowledgeable and experienced enough' to stimulate and be a part of the process (PO03; LD02; EP04). On the other hand, some argue that government officials should not deem this as a burden. Governmental implementers may take prompt actions in grasping the chance to foster a strong bonding with parties to facilitate the execution of the programmes as suggested by Mathie and Cunningham ([2005](#)).

The results of this study also indicate that the traditional culture and customs of ethnic minority groups in Son La province is of great importance for PR progress. Among physical and non physical assets in Son La province, the roles of ethnic culture and customs can be described as a contributing factor in the poverty reduction process, yet it can only be effectively exercised with appropriate organization and management strategies.

*The way to use the ABCD approach to promote a locally driven poverty reduction process in Son La province*

As outlined in the previous chapter, the main reason to motivate local residents to join the initiatives of government is to provide them with visible power and benefits that they can immediately take advantage of, which originate from their internal assets, such as cultural power and social relationships. Besides, the actual performance of local residents and the resources within their community are also studied in the research in terms of their participation in the poverty reduction process. During the research, a highlight on the lack of understanding of the roles

of different departments at province level in the PR process is also mentioned. With this foundation, local authorities as well as leaders of Son La Province People's Committee can form effective approaches in exercising ACBD principles and practices.

Concerning the level of reachability of assets among local residents, it can be inferred from the research that there is a close link between the efficiency of the ABCD approach and the level of assets access among localities. However, it appears that government authorities cast a strong influence in deciding the level of access, which is a confusing situation seeing the fact that the ABCD approach is a sophisticated method of poverty reduction. As the approach focusses on asset utilization, conventional implementation may not be appropriate. Haines and Green (2012) are of the opinion that ABCD is a popular approach among many countries, yet its efficiency has not been thoroughly researched and recognized ([Pawar, 2009](#)). It is imperative that our leaders<sup>22</sup> should possess a broad vision of this ABCD approach to prepare for poverty reduction process in their next five year plan, which is the foundation to build the socio-economic development and poverty reduction plan for the next generation.

To date, the majority of poverty reduction programmes implemented in Son La province are largely dependent on subsidies from governments as well as Overseas Development Aid from concerned nations, which reflects a critical fact that all the forces taking part in the poverty alleviation campaign are directly or indirectly acting passively. They deem external assistance an essential key factor in the campaign, a notion which needs to be re-oriented among involved participants to ensure partial or entire success. From a local perspective, it should be emphasized that leaders of the communities bear the responsibility of building a clear and suitable action plan that reciprocates with the goals of the group with support from

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<sup>22</sup> Province leaders



both internal and external resources. With righteous vision and an organized action plan, it is certain that the community are armed with sufficient forces to fight poverty.

## **7.2. Recommendations or solutions**

One key finding of this study is that although the living condition of poor households in Son La province has significantly improved over the last few years, particularly amongst ethnic minorities, it is also clear that the poverty rate still remains very high, almost four times higher than the national average. The poverty reduction process has, to date, not been sustainable ([UBND 2015c](#)). Our analysis here suggests that in order to maintain sustainability and narrow the gap between Son La and the national Vietnamese experience, future poverty reduction approaches should be inclusive of internal resources from poor households themselves. This statement is reinforced by the fact that external resources are often limited and unstable, the dependence on which may lead to catastrophic consequences if central and local governments (for example through a change in the political climate) cease to support the schemes properly. The participation of local residents has been enhanced recently, which should make it easier for the application of an approach that is based on internal resources.

The thesis will now provide a number of suggestions for future policies and programmes to support improvements in the living standards of poor households in Son La province, and ethnic minority poor households in particular, in a manner which aims to achieve sustainable development. We will emphasize recommendations that could facilitate the implementation of effective and sustainable poverty alleviation schemes, thereby raising the bar of living conditions for the poverty class in Son La province. The recommendations are based on the statements of local residents and local authorities through the interviews and FGDs,

combined with information from the official reports collected during the fieldwork process in Son La province. The suggestions are divided in two. Firstly, the policy framework and secondly the role of ABCD in the sustainable poverty reduction process.

### ***7.2.1. Policy framework***

Among problems concerning the policy framework, it would be remiss not to mention the issue of overlapping. It cannot be denied that the research of this thesis has indicated a repetition in the process of drafting and proposing poverty reduction programmes, which calls for the needs of uniformity in the range of documents issued. As highlighted in section 7.1.1, there are too many policies specifically designed to assist the northern west mountainous provinces (Son La), and ethnic minority groups as well. To mitigate against these problems, it is suggested that the government should place more attention on the composing of these policies. Authors may find ways to trim the outline of every policy, especially those that are directly applied to low levels of participants, in order to simplify the process. What is more, poverty reduction programmes should be comprehended and integrated with a broad vision that could be effectively applied during a five year period without becoming obsolete. The content of policy should be shortened and clarified, to avoid repetition and improve flexibility for different cases, regions and groups.

Focussing upon the role of participating agencies that are responsible for the poverty reduction programmes, it is imperative that the position as well as level of participation among these groups, such as DOLISA, DEMA, DOF, DOET should be officially stated so that they are fully aware of their duty during the implementation. From well organized task delegation, these agencies should obtain the necessary foundation to fulfil their task without conflicts with other co-operators. In this way, the collaboration between agencies is completely harmonized, the people who benefit most are people directly involved in the implementation process and poor households as they are put under a well organized scheme. Given the Son La province context, the coordination role should be placed

on DEMA, for contacting and delegating tasks (PO03).

From the view of directly involved implementers, some of participants at the province level affirmed their views that the current approach of the government was not suitable:

*It could never be appropriate. It could be appropriate if Vietnam is a rich country. However, the government do not possess enough resources to provide forever. Recently, the government have called for numerous assistance at local level, including various forces like native citizens, poor households, local authorities, NGOs as well as specific organizations related to women, youth and children benefits.*

Another problem concerning the policy framework is the limited access to assets for local residents, especially poor households, the cause of which originates from difference in languages. It is a fact that communication between implementers and poor households often encounters misinterpretation due to the lack of understanding of the other side's language, for most households are of ethnic minority groups with a different language from Vietnamese. A temporary solution to end misunderstanding is to fill the gap of languages by recruiting interpreters with experience in working with ethnic groups to ensure the content of every meeting or discussion on poverty reduction plans are effectively delivered and both sides clearly grasp the nature of the action plan. However, to sustainably maintain the understanding, educational investment is an essential step. By this I mean, reinforcement of education should be the core of attention if one wishes to decrease the poverty rate in Son La province. Students from ethnic minorities should be trained with as much attention, even much more than those coming from other areas, so that they are fully developed in the near future and are well prepared to be the connection between their people and outside implementers in order to enhance the poverty reduction process. However, the language barrier is not the only obstacle to poverty reduction. The notion that ethnic minorities bear a precious and

irreplaceable source of cultural values has restricted many implementers in poverty reduction campaigns. Due to the fear of losing traditional customs by modernization, many people possess a strict viewpoint on the changes among ethnic minorities, yet it appears to be irrational as positive changes will open the opportunity of development among ethnic groups, thus improving the living standards of poor people. Traditional and cultural values can definitely be preserved with proper organization and execution from the government during the campaign.

The second issue that needs to be discussed in this section is that the government seems to put a high expectation on poverty programmes while their resources are not always available to support projects. Under the poverty reduction schemes, it can be inferred that any households which are categorised as poor may receive the same level of assistance from governments, no matter how much the situation differs in households. This policy means that the government is always obliged to maintain an adequate amount of resources, including financial support, educational support and medical support, to distribute fairly among households. The approach appears to be desirable and is sure to equalize the chance of improvement for households alike, yet it would be a tough challenge for the government in the long run. This approach of the government was also regarded as being too ambitious. One director of a province department said:

*Many other countries have succeeded in dealing with poverty using another method. Their first and foremost concern is to provide poor people with enough food and clothes to get by. When the situation gets stable, they move on to a more sophisticated stage, which is to assist and orient them in struggling with poverty. We seemed to be impatient, so we rushed into solving economic, educational and medical issues at the same time, which has now proved to be nearly impossible.*

To solve the problem of limited resources as mentioned in section 5.2.4, the

authorities at the commune and district level need to find a way to combine and integrate several programmes in order to save resources and maximize efficiency:

*Two billion is not enough, but five billion (£152.000) is a different story. If the government grants us the right to use the entire sum of money by ourselves, we can build a very good water system which can meet our needs (SC03).*

Thirdly, it has been mentioned in Chapter five that poor households often ideologically depend on the support of government. In order to avoid leakage of resources and the wrong selection of beneficiaries, as well as to mitigate against this dependence, some participants suggest that before conducting reviews and selecting a number of households into a poverty list at village and commune level, the local authorities should actively investigate as well as observe with their own eyes the actual situation of each household, so as to guarantee fairness and objectiveness for the poverty list. As the participants in the FGDs in Phong Lai commune suggested:

*We need to classify the poor households into different groups: (1) First group: The household with only one young couple (age under 40) where all of the family members are healthy (that family does not contain anyone with disabilities or long-term illness, elderly people who need to take care of ...) and are capable of working but lazy. (2) Second group: the households with elderly people, but relatives who are supposed to take care of them to receive economic support, and take advantage from the state policies. (3) Third group: the poor household contains a member with alcoholism or gambling addiction (FGDs01).*

In order to fairly support poor households, it is essential that local authorities and implementers, who are directly involved in reviewing the poverty level in Son La province, should build a firm evaluation system to best assess the level of poverty and difficulties that ethnic households are facing to provide them with prompt and

suitable support.

The fourth suggestion that gained approval among many of our participants is decentralization of the poverty reduction process. The method can be described as a modification of policies when they reach remote areas and ethnic minority contexts. The government is the only source from which policies regarding poverty are discussed and composed, yet it is local authorities who are actually involved in the implementation. When the policies reach remote areas where most poor households exist, they have to be modified to a certain extent in order to match the cultural and economic characteristics of the area to produce the best results. This method has proved to be effective and should be encouraged so that local authorities could find ways to integrate financial support from government into their own decisions of modification to maximize the benefits of poverty reduction programmes as well as enabling the utilization of internal and external assets. Based on that, Son La PPC has the discretion to integrate local programmes with central government policies. As mentioned in Chapter five, this approach has been applied in some Son La plans. In this way, no approach absolutely resembles one another as each area within a province has employed a different way to implement it and the main responsibility shifts from government to local authorities (EP02), which is an advantage in the management of poverty reduction programmes as any errors or misconduct in the process can be immediately traced back to solve problems in a timely manner. The leader of Son La province also agreed with this view (PO03; PO04):

*When policies move down from centre to province and from province to district and communes, the lower level will modify them in ways that are more suitable with their areas while inconsistent with the original objectives. The local authorities have more chance to apply the modification based on their evaluation of what should be the main focus of the programme (PO03).*

We now move on to consider appropriate methods to increase the participation of ethnic minorities in poverty reduction. As noted previously, when conducting a poverty reduction strategy, the implementers have to face strong obstacles, which resulted from the lack of participation of ethnic minorities. The lack of participation of this important group of residents has led to results which deteriorating the effectiveness of the programme. We will recommend several solutions to improve this situation. The first is raising the spirit and competence of the current participants and potential participants. The poverty reduction programme needs the involvement of various parties, ranging from high-level authorities to extremely poor people or from major ethnic groups to minor ethnic groups. During the strategy process, it may be observed that the involved authorities possibly are not enthusiastic or even unethical in encouraging the participation of various community members. The lack of enthusiasm of implementers has resulted from the conception of benefit orientation. The community authority may ask themselves the questions whether they receive benefits from the campaign or not. It is obvious that the benefit of a poverty reduction programme is for the whole community development, and the individual benefit is only in the long term or not easy to see immediately. The community authority and strategy implementers may consider that they do not receive great things from what they do, therefore, they take action with a low level of involvement and passion. This perception will lead to the existing situation of little enthusiasm and encouragement for the participation of ethnic minority groups. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that ethnic minority groups tend to live in remote areas with poor infrastructure and poor transportation – they are ‘hard to reach’.

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In order to raise the spirit and competence of current participation, the spreading of education and propagation is worth focussing on. It is important that the high-level authority should try to make the participating community understand the overall importance and benefits that the poverty reduction programme brings about. From understanding the role of the strategy of fighting against poverty, participants will

see the link between the sustainable development of the community and individual improvement. The success and result of the programme may take a long time, however it is worth waiting for and needs the strong engagement of various parties. With enthusiasm and a high level of responsibility, the implementers and other participants will not tire, will overcome obstacles to access ethnic minority groups, and will encourage them to raise their voice for the strategy. In addition, with the help of an effective education method, community participants will find it easier to understand the ethnic minority people, based on their existing knowledge of the culture and customs of the various groups. With the instruction and support of these participants, the involvement of ethnic minority group will be more highly ensured and easier to enable.

In order to encourage ethnic minority groups to be more involved in the process of fighting against poverty, their strength and capability must be improved. It is widely realized that the educational and cultural level of this group seems to be very limited. This partially comes from the far distance and unfavourable geographical context in which they live, making these people difficult to access in terms of modern amenities. The lack of concern of the government is another reason for this situation and poor economic growth restricts people from thinking further about educational and cultural improvement. Without the right knowledge and understanding, it is difficult for ethnic minority people to follow a strategy. It becomes harder for them to participate thoroughly in the poverty fighting campaign. Therefore, what is required is a raising of the level of knowledge and education for this group. As mentioned above, there are several obstacles existing, preventing ethnic minority residents from receiving conveyed information, such as language gaps and culture gaps. The contribution of local leaders and authorities is necessary in this respect. With the help of local leaders, these above gaps are easier to be tightened because they will act as a link between two sides. In addition, the further long term investment of the government in the field of education, as well as cultural exchange promotion, will help tighten the gaps too. With higher levels of education



and understanding of the strategic problems and issues, ethnic minority residents will find it easier to get up date with new policies and programmes. It will be less tough for them to express their thinking, their ideas and to actively intervene in the fight against their own poverty.

These above ideas are suitable for a long term view and the following proposal is suitable for the short term view. The immediate solution for the higher contribution and better participation of the ethnic minority residents is to create a matching solution for the groups of ethnic minorities. Each group has different assets to explore and employ, and it is necessary for the authority to direct the group in the right way, in order to maximize their potential. For example, one group might be suitable for planting trees, while others should concentrate on raising animals. In addition, technological support is necessary, so that the effect of the strategy will have the maximum effect.

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Last but not least, we suggest a method for reducing the possibility of authority dependency. Mathie and Cunningham discussed dependency as a challenge for the ABCD approach. They argue that ABCD has the basic principle that it should be a community-driven process. The role of an external agency stands at the initial stage, as a facilitator of the process and as a note in enlarging the network of connection of the community with other parties. The challenge is to prevent the engagement from turning into dependency. Dependency on authority also exists in the reality at present in the province. The authority got used to helping poor people in single steps for a long time. They are afraid that small interventions from them is not enough for the implementation of the strategy, or that the lower level parties will do something wrong. However, independence is the essence of sustainable development and the participation of various parties is necessary to ensure the success of a poverty reduction campaign.

In order to reduce the possibility of authority dependency, we suggest two solutions for further consideration. The first one emphasizes the careful planning process while the second one focuses on improving attitude. The careful planning process enables parties to know what steps they should get involved in and what their exact role is in launching the strategy. Based on the clarified plan, the authorities understand when they should stop interfering with the activeness of the participants. Furthermore, while directing the plan, the strategy is clear from the authority – to promote the sustainable independence of the poor in saving themselves from poverty.

### *Role of NGOS*

In Vietnam, NGOs has financed more than 50 million US dollar (900 billion VND) for 64 projects at communes of 135 programmes in 2006-2010 period. This may not be the biggest contributors of external assistance, but the participation of NGOs in the most remote communes in Vietnam and their emphasis on poverty reduction programmes, as well as the facilitation of schemes upgrading the countryside, is widely appreciated and has brought about significantly positive effects ([Son, 2010](#)). During NGOs' appearance in Vietnam, they have contributed greatly to the development of the country in various aspects, including economy, education and health care services. The support from NGOs often comes in the form of financial funding and human resources training, as well as consultation in the implementation of many policies, among which poverty alleviation has been one of their primary fields of study. What is more, the collaboration between NGOs and governmental departments has led to tremendous achievements in terms of systematic modification to fit the actual situation.

#### **7.2.2. Poverty reduction approach**

In the implementation process of poverty reduction, there have been several approaches to ensure the efficiency of the method. They can be listed as the decentralization method of implementing policies to guarantee stable improvement,

the enhancement of the perception of beneficiaries, which are ethnic minorities and poor households, and the utilization of external supports besides recognition of internal assets.

#### *Decentralization to ensure sustainable development*

Restriction in decentralization strategy has not stopped itself from popularizing among areas where the poverty rate is considerably high. This strategy has stimulated local residents who are directly involved in poverty reduction schemes to raise their own voice over the implementation process. In other words, a decentralization strategy allows its participants to modify the plans to suit their needs in a way that encourages them to utilize their internal strengths. In the five communes studied in this research, there has been already the existence of decentralization of poverty programmes and policies in poverty management system, which allows a better target at beneficiaries. Thanks to this method, local authorities could obtain a deeper understanding of local residents and all members of the communes; therefore they are advantageous in identifying the poor households. However, as mentioned in chapters five and six, the method used by MOLISA to determine the poor households and poverty rate has encountered significant problems. Because the system only relies on the level of income to classify villagers, along with insufficient measuring indexes to calculate the national poverty line, a part of the poor are not included in the list of beneficiaries while they are actually as vulnerable and badly in need of help as poverty groups. On the contrary, some other households are not really poor, yet they would be listed as poor households in the situation of economic recession or failures in business, or after a harsh time of flood or drought (PO03; EP02). One province leader said:

*Devolution appears to be an effective solution because it involves the transfer of power to local mass organizations with autonomy, legal personality and representation. They will play a more important role during the whole process. This form of decentralization needs to be accompanied by*

*mechanism for popular participation in the process of decision-making that take place at the village level (PO05).*

In all five researched communes, there have already been many mass organizations such as women associations, farmer associations, veteran union and youth unions. These associations have many characteristics in common, which are leadership, compatible knowledge and necessary skills to manage all assigned tasks. Obviously, these groups operate on their own rules and may act under the control of a commune people's committee. On the other hand, as mentioned in the previous chapter and section 7.1.1, all policies and programmes fighting poverty utilize the format of 'one size fits all' ([Hung. et al., 2011](#)). This means that they have a set of documents that explain clearly all mandatory steps to follow and are the same for all regions and provinces, without taking into account the specific characteristics of each province and region:

*Local mass organizations do not have the right to change anything. The result is that the decision by a mass organization or local authorities is always passively responded, which does not reflect effective implementation. (LD06).*

There have been debates about the rising concern of implementation methods that are community oriented or locally oriented during the last twenty years ([Goatting and Green, 2010](#); [Haines and Green, 2012](#)). It is a common fact that governmental agencies are coordinating comprehensively with local residents as well as authorities. Seeing the truth that lower levels of authorities often share closer relationships with poor households than most central agencies do, it cannot be denied that the essence of local forces outcast its higher level ones in implementing poverty reduction schemes. From another view, in order to promote local resident and poor people engagement in the process of planning and implementing poverty

reduction goals, province authorities have to exercise a number of principles, such as the provision of pertinent and updated information on poverty-related policies, sufficient resources for identified priority targets and the best mechanism for feedback from citizens and stakeholders.

#### *Broadening poor households' awareness*

During this part I would like to restate some issues in poor households' awareness of poverty. The first notion that is popular among poor people is that the government should be the key implementer during a poverty reduction process and it is entirely accountable for providing poor people with food, clothes, education and health care services. Furthermore, there should be no other assistance except from those originating from government or foreign organizations ([Kretzmann et al.2005](#)). Another remarkable misleading perception concerns lack of assets, in which most poor people are of the opinion that they do not possess anything valuable or assets that can be of help in poverty reduction and they could do nothing but wait for support from experienced and capable professionals in the relevant fields:

*I think when a household or commune is provided with considerable support instead of trying to utilize their internal force; it becomes unwarily reliant on the continual support, which is an unwanted result (PO03).*

Another perception in need of changing is the popular pessimistic attitude among poor people. Most people are often in a helpless or hopeless status and it is common that they think they lack power, skills and also knowledge to escape from poverty. As pointed out in chapters five and six, the physical, financial and social difficulties faced by poor households and ethnic minority groups in Son La province are undeniable. It is also recognised that they mostly have lower positions and less power in their areas (village and commune), while the power is transferred to the local authorities such as leader of village and commune or district officials

(EP02; EP04; LD06).

### *Leveraging the external resources*

The community-driven nature of an ABCD process does not intend to negate the need for external assistance, but allows groups to determine how to effectively access and leverage any available funding and resources from both within and beyond the scope of the area to assist a poverty reduction campaign. Utilization of internal assets is of great importance in the poverty reduction process; however there should also be some emphasis on the existence of external assets. No matter how strong the internal forces are, a poverty reduction process can never succeed without combination with external assets. In this case, external assets refer to governmental subsidy as well as the addition of human resources and researches conducted from NGOs. Therefore, it would be efficient if local authorities are perceptive of the significance of external resources and are able to attract these forces when necessary to ensure desirable results. According to McKnight and Kretzmann ([1993: 8](#)) ‘outside resources will be much more effectively used if the local community is itself fully mobilized and invested, and if it can define the agendas for which additional resources must be obtained. The assets within lower income communities, in other words, are absolutely necessary but usually not sufficient to meet the huge development challenges ahead’.

### **7.3. Challenges of practising ABCD in poverty reduction progress: the way forward**

According to Quang Hoan (2016), in recent years, ethnic relations in Vietnam have been a matter of urgency that need special attention, especially in some strategic areas with diverse ethnic composition and religion, including the Central Highlands. During the implementation of this process, there have been several difficulties arising concerning the limitation of resources as well as the lack of harmony in

coordination between parties. Firstly, it is an undeniable fact that the implementation of poverty reduction schemes in Vietnam in general and Son La in particular have faced a lack of resources. As noted in the previous section, both internal resources or external resources are of great essence in the implementation procedure. The lack of any assets may be a loss to the whole process and delay the success of the programmes. During my research in Son La, I am of the opinion that there is a deficiency in the level of education among most poor households, the reasons of which lie in the fact that poor people are not able to afford education fees, even though it has been among the lowest rate compared with the whole country. Besides, the geographic feature of mountainous area places a significant barrier in the pursuit of education for many children in Son La province. Without an adequate education level, it is difficult for local residents to absorb and apply the knowledge provided through poverty reduction programmes in their production and employment to increase their standard of living. For example, it is widely known that most people in ethnic groups live on farming activities, yet for lack of agricultural knowledge, they are often unable to deal with external issues during farming time. Climate change and its impacts are totally out of their reach, which makes it difficult for them to enhance productivity and seek effective methods to maximize their revenues on farming. The low level of education in Son La ethnic groups also leads to undesirable results in their life, as they do not have the foundation in health care and this often leads to an unhealthy life.

Secondly, a lack of regional coordination can be observed throughout the implementation of poverty reduction schemes. As argued above, there is often an overlap in the design of poverty policies as each section is assigned to a different agency. This does not only complicate matters but also results in disorganization in the cooperation process. Due to the diverse nature of parties that are directly involved in the process, there can hardly be a harmony between them while cooperation is an irreplaceable factor dictating the success of any scheme. Therefore, the situation calls for a neutral party which can act as a coordinator to

communicate and delegate tasks among parties. Lack of harmony can also be seen on a micro scale, given that ABCD is a method that welcomes the collaboration of different mass organizations within an area to realize one common goal. As each mass organization operates under a separate regulation that suits their characteristics, it is not easy to gather them around to reach agreements. Although decentralization is a well received method in poverty reduction schemes, it still contains some certain downsides, one of which is the incapability of local authorities. It has been mentioned that decentralization describes a policy that has been amended so that it suits the features of a particular area instead of keeping the original version as it was published by the government. In order to effectively carry out the decentralization, the ability of a local authority who directly involves in the procedure is the key factor deciding the success of the process. However, as I mentioned in previous paragraph, due to the low level of education among ethnic minorities, the average ability and vision of local authorities or leaders of these groups is certainly lower than the national average level, thus making it harder to deliver and execute the programmes with precision. Lack of capability in local leaders may not guarantee the efficiency of the poverty programmes which has been tailored to match the needs of the areas. What is more, due to the low living standard of many remote areas, it is nearly impossible to attract talented leaders to the region as there is hardly any form of incentives to promote career opportunities in these provinces. The training of current leaders is also less emphasized due to the lack of infrastructure and facilities that could assist these people in implementing the procedure.

#### **7.4. Conclusion**

This chapter presents the view that PRA, SLA and other approaches on poverty reduction, reinforced with an ABCD approach, are the most appropriate for poverty reduction in Son La and Vietnam. This correlates with the study results of Peters et



al.(2009). Thus, ABCD is able to materialize and assist the implementation of different approaches. It can be stated that the ABCD approach is one in which every step and action plan focusses entirely upon local residents or poor households in Son La province by asking and answering the crucial question of what is the strength or assets of these people that can help them escape poverty. Once the question is answered satisfactorily, many problems can be solved accordingly. Thus, we are arguing that there is a way to successfully implement a poverty reduction plan - to integrate existing approaches with ABCD as the main constitution of the next phase of the socio-economic and poverty reduction plans for the period 2016-2020. The author believes this is the most suitable way to activate growth and reduce poverty. This will involve building close links between local authorities, NGOs, other outside forces and the beneficiaries – ethnic minority groups living in poverty. The implementation of each part should be supervised by others, thus ensuring the quality and timely schedule of poverty reduction schemes and increasing transparency. From this combination, poor households will be most benefited, not only because their rights will be defended and their chances of development secured but because they will be centrally involved in these processes. Instead of being regarded as poor households with low levels of education and perceived as acting passively, they will be held in much higher regard, when they have the right to speak up and transform their status into proactive citizens defending their own rights. To enable this, the role of NGOs or external implementers is essential for orienting poor people's mind-set and stimulating significant movement in their perceptions ([Mathie and Cunningham 2008](#)).

As McKnight and Kretzmann ([1993: 5](#)) note, 'ABCD is a method that utilizes the internal forces of poor households regarding their abilities, strength and characteristics to form a development strategy'.. As observed in other poverty reduction schemes which have followed this model, the outcome of this method is gaining in reputation and direct links are made to increasing economic growth. Furthermore, ABCD should not ignore the importance of fostering and maintaining

a mutual understanding with poor households as well as an appropriate attitude working with these groups in order not to trigger misinterpretation or misjudgement. ([O'Leary 2006: 6](#)). This can be an efficient method that helps improve the condition of ethnic minorities in the long term. In addition to the combination of ABCD with other poverty reduction approaches, it is essential for policy makers to also pay attention to the development of basic facilities and infrastructural systems in remote areas. This has become a key factor in deciding the level of success of poverty reduction programmes. The idea of investing in local facilities has been a significant one in Vietnam for many years. A recent report details that nearly 80 per cent of the poverty reduction budget was spent on local infrastructural development between 2011-2013 ([Dung and Cuong 2015](#)). Infrastructural investment generally refers to the act of broadening road networks in remote areas as well as developing premises for social purposes, such as schools and hospitals. However, as we have seen above, the extent to which this aids poverty reduction alone has been questioned, and it must now be tempered and developed alongside ABCD approaches which also activate poor citizens in their own poverty reduction.

This chapter's conclusion, and thus the overall conclusion to the thesis, is based upon the arguments and conclusions of previous chapters, combining primary data, largely collected from interviews with local residents in the five chosen communes in Son La province, with the secondary data of many governmental reports on Son La province at different levels as well as documents and researches published by NGOs. The author has aimed to provide a critical discussion of current poverty reduction policies and programmes, alongside an exposition of the views of local residents and government officers towards these policies. Existing poverty reduction programmes and policies have inherent flaws in project planning, resource mobilization and resource allocation. Based on these discussions and the evidence from our empirical research, we hereby suggest some central, original and final solutions and recommendations for sustainable poverty reduction amongst

ethnic minority groups in Son La province. These are: (1) to overcome overlapping in the design and implementation of poverty reduction programmes and policies; (2) that planning and decision making processes should be decentralized to commune level; (3) that resource mobilization and allocation should be handed to local government from commune level; (4) a support package should be provided to communes to enhance the effectiveness of poverty reduction policies and their implementation; (5) an appropriate poverty monitoring system should be developed, which is based on the participation of local residents; (6) that there should be methods to improve the participation of ethnic minority people in poverty reduction embedded in all policies; (7) all of the above should aim to reduce the possibility of authority dependency.

This thesis has highlighted the numerous challenges that Vietnam in general, and Son La province in particular, has encountered in maintaining the stability of poverty reduction as poverty remains central to the experience of ethnic minority groups and they continue to fall significantly behind the national development pattern. There needs to be a specific focus upon poverty reduction amongst ethnic minority groups. Ethnic minorities should be given special attention and granted more opportunities to discover and utilize their potential in order to gradually equalize with majority groups. Though our analysis of poverty reduction programme application in Son La, it can be seen that attention upon ethnic minorities to date has largely focussed upon investment in facilities and infrastructure. This is important, given that ethnic minorities often inhabit remote areas, meaning that traffic access is underdeveloped because of geographic challenges. However, they also need to be given the opportunity to utilise the opportunities presented by upgraded infrastructure, through the simultaneous uplift of their human capabilities and capitals – ‘soft’ infrastructure as well as ‘hard’.

#### ***7.4.1. Recommendation for the improvement of the role of local residents and***

### ***mass organization to ensure sustainable development***

As mentioned in chapters five and six, within the new context of poverty reduction for ethnic minorities in Son La province, and particularly in remote areas, the roles of local residents and mass organizations need to be changed in order to better adapt to and implement the newly proposed poverty reduction programmes and policies. It is widely known that Vietnam in general, and Son La in particular, possess traditional customs which have been in existence for hundreds or even thousands of years. Among these values, collaboration is one that is frequently highlighted. Developing from the particularly harsh times of war during the twentieth century, Vietnam's mass organizations have also proved to be long lasting within all sectors, including politics, education and the economy. Each mass organization has a distinguished role in society and aims to serve different groups of people. For example, the Vietnam Youth Organization represents the dynamic youngsters of the country, while Vietnam's Women Organization is always prepared to raise its voice over the benefits of, and to defend the rights of, Vietnamese women. There are others groups who represent senior citizens or veterans. Those who staff these organizations have devoted their whole life for the sake of the country but even they need to adopt the different attitudes to the poor and ethnic minority groups that have been outlined in this thesis if sustainable poverty reduction is going to be achieved.

Overall, local authorities all over the country and in Son La maintain a relatively stable relationship with residents, especially poor households. That is a necessity as mutual understanding is essential in assisting poor households to escape poverty. However, the relationship between these specific mass organizations and ethnic minorities is particularly important. Mass organizations are more significant than local authorities when it comes to fostering connections due to the fact that they share some level of sympathy or bears several similarities with local residents, which is a rare situation with authorities of local level. People congregate within

mass organizations because they are like-minded or have had similar experiences, such as fighting in a war, or they are of similar age. Thus, coordination among them originates from willingness. This differs from local authorities, where the relationship with local citizens is often built on legal or systematic foundations, it is less about willingness. Mass organizations, on the contrary, were by their very nature created on the basis of trust and empathy between members. As it takes time and lots of effort to nurture a close link between local authorities and ethnic minorities, it is vital that mass organizations act as a bridge to connect these two parties to coordinate towards one common goal. In order to fulfil the task, the role of mass organizations in poverty reduction action plans should be emphasized and they can be utilized to leverage their influence in orienting ethnic minorities. Mass organizations should be considered as key stakeholders in poverty reduction processes and should be given the opportunity to participate and raise their voices in discussions and meetings, as their opinions may be of great value to project planning. Those who work within these organizations possess a deep understanding of poor people from different perspectives and their ideas and perceptions are based on long term observation of poor people's experience.

#### ***7.4.2. Policy framework***

It is a fact that evaluation of poverty levels and categorizing poor households into different groups to tailor support has been the responsibility of governmental organizations across areas of the country. However, with unclear and obsolete criteria of poverty judgement, the process has not produced desirable results, with misjudgement still prevalent and waste of resources inevitable. Lately (2015), it has been emphasized by central government that the classification of households which are likely to be in poverty needs to be executed precisely to make way for reasonable budgeting for these schemes and to avoid corruption, thus ensuring the fairness and clarity of poverty reduction plans.

As discussed in part 5.2.2, existing policies concerning poverty reduction contain significant weaknesses, particularly their direct support for poor households in terms of education, finance and health care. This can temporarily solve the problems of poverty and cater for the very basic needs of poor households and ethnic minorities in a way that appears to raise their living standards to a level that is as close to the average national standards as possible. However, due to the limited resources available, a highly contemporary issue for central government, the stability of support, and therefore the sustainability of this approach, is not at all guaranteed. Once the government stops supportive plans, poor households, which have just escaped from harsh living conditions, will almost certainly fall back into the same pattern. Consequently, this thesis has strongly suggested a set of recommendations based on the notion that poor households and ethnic groups should be the main force in fighting their own poverty. The role of poor people should never be underestimated as they can be the driving force of sustainable development. Government, on the other hand, can not act as a determining force in the long term. They should only play a supportive and guiding role in orienting the implementation of policies. Poor households themselves should be held accountable for every decision they make under the execution of programmes because they understand their strengths and weaknesses much better than any outsiders, even mass organizations.

#### *7.4.2.1. Increase investment in education:*

In order to leverage the key participation of poor households in poverty reduction, there needs to be a firm focus on education. With a strong foundation of education, poor households and ethnic minorities will be armed with a powerful tool to enhance their performance and circumstances. Educational enhancement needs to start from primary level to ensure students in remote areas are adequately trained, forming a firm foundation that allows them to advance to the next levels. This stage is also important as it will empower students to develop a level of perception that is equal to that of

many students in developed areas. Perception is of great importance, it allows the development of a mind-set required for the future, which will be especially beneficial for the long term interests of ethnic minority pupils.

Rates of school absence are currently very high among ethnic students in remote areas. Such students often come from poor households who prioritize employment over education. It is understandable that these families only see the benefits of employment, which is to provide them with food and earnings to live on, while education is a process that takes time to yield desirable results. Furthermore, the geographical location of ethnic minority groups in north-west Vietnam poses a daunting challenge to many children who would love to go to school, especially under unfavourable weather conditions. The solution to this matter, it can be argued, lies in the voice of mass organizations, such as youth organizations or the Vietnam women's organization. These organizations are well aware of the significance of education and they also maintain a close relationship with many poor households and ethnic groups, therefore they may be much more influential than local government in persuading and delivering the essence of education to change poor people's mind-set. With such a paradigm shift in perception, there would certainly be a hope of success for poverty reduction schemes.

#### *7.4.2.2. Simplify financial process*

For people living in poverty, an issue that would attract their attention is undeniably financial benefit. It is a common notion among many poor households that the main aim of poverty reduction programmes is to grant them with a sum of money to invest in their own start-up business. Partially, there is nothing wrong with this perception, but problems persist within the complicated process of money allocation to each poor household. From our interviews and fieldwork with local residents in Son La province, there is a level of agreement among interviewees with the point that poor households and ethnic minorities often find it lengthy and time consuming

to complete the paper requirements as stated in the regulation in order to receive a subsidy from the government. Due to the lack of flexibility in financial processes, financial support for many poor households is often severely delayed and thus adversely affects their action plans in escaping poverty. So as to adjust the process to both confirm to poverty reduction regulations and ensure its reachability among beneficiaries, local governments need to be directly involved to evaluate the current funding situation so that decisions can be made based on the reality of poverty conditions in their areas. For example, local authorities need to simplify the loan application process in a way that it is specifically designed for poor households.

#### *7.4.2.3. Reinforce the position of leader in communes*

Considering the fact that poverty reduction policies are implemented with tailored modification to each remote area, the position of leaders who are actively involved should be emphasized. Every poverty reduction programmes, when decentralized to district and commune level, is supervised and monitored by the leader of the region. These people play an important part in delivering the message as well as acting as a connection between native residents and government. With well oriented perception and deep understanding of the characteristics of ethnic minorities within the area, it is easier for them to implement poverty reduction programmes in line with the guidance from central government.

In order to make the best use of the assets in enhancing programme implementation, it is vital that commune leaders should be given adequate training on communication skills as well as basic knowledge concerning the poverty situation of the province in general and their areas in particular so that they are provided with the necessary assets to facilitate the method of communicating and orienting other local people within their areas.

#### *7.4.2.4. The extent of contribution from the ABCD approach*



Confusion has arisen over the position of parties involved in ABCD application in poverty reduction programmes. Despite the fact that guidance published by government and local authorities has defined precisely the tasks and scope of work for each stakeholder in implementing the process, actual execution does not often replicate this. Local residents express their vague perception over the contribution of assisting parties in the campaign, or even lack proper understanding of the level of participation of these forces. This lack of uniformity in the level of involvement of related parties during the process leaves an unsolved matter. Documentation has not succeeded in delivering the message about role delegation among local residents, meaning that taking proper action must be the key to this problem. It is essential for the government and also local authorities to control the actual implementation of plans aiming at poverty reduction as thoroughly as possible to mitigate any delay or any misconduct. The intervention of the government may be effective in ensuring a uniformity of task delegation among parties and thus increasing trust from local residents.

#### ***7.4.3. Challenges of the poverty reduction process***

The above proposals and solutions appear to be appropriate in dealing with problems arising when executing government policies. However, actual performance depends on various factors, one of which is the availability of resources. The most important issue relates to the lack of human resources, especially human resources with the capability to be directly and indirectly involved in the process. It is a fact that there is always a deficiency of teachers who volunteer to work in remote areas due to the harsh living conditions and lack of career opportunities. In this sense, the promotion of educational importance faces difficulties and calls for support from governmental level so as to maintain an acceptable labour force that are willing to settle in remote areas for a certain period of time in order to improve the educational situation. Lack of funding is another big issue as the total budget is limited and there are numerous sectors that are badly in need of assistance. To ensure effective implementation of these solutions,

governmental interference on the above matter is critical.

It is widely announced by the Vietnamese government that the general percentage of poor households in Vietnam is not hugely significant. The figures used are the result of a poverty criterion based on a low income rate, which seems to be highly unreasonable. However, considering the fact that governmental support is not always available and generous in terms of funding and human resources, the criterion has been calculated thoroughly to balance with the availability of external assets. Accordingly, the government can only resort to the most practical remedy at a particular point in time in order to prepare a budget allocation to assist households in most difficulties. The government's decisions, rationale and actions in this respect were unanimously understood and agreed by implementers at the site - local authorities, commune leaders and NGO experts. DOLISA, the department holding accountability for poverty reduction schemes management in Son La, admit the fact that the current situation of poverty in Vietnam cannot be entirely represented through the poverty line. Nonetheless, they express the idea that raising the poverty line may lead to an overwhelming number of actual poor households and an increasing poverty rate. This change results in a burden for the government - limited resources do not guarantee proper assistance for all poor households.

Another challenge faced during the implementation of the poverty reduction programmes refers to the conventional structure of management. It is a normal situation in Vietnam in general and Son La in particular that the management system follows a top-down model in which leaders and communal authorities take a predominant position in the decision making process. Accordingly, local residents and ethnic minorities are not often given the chance to voice their opinion over discussed matters, which may lead to a lack of objectiveness and inaccuracy of implementation. Ethnic minorities and local residents, though possessing low levels of education and experience, are those directly undergoing the consequences of poverty and they possess a comprehensive understanding of their own situation.

Therefore, the lack of contribution by ethnic groups, due to the typical management strategy in Son La, can decrease the efficiency of poverty reduction programmes.

The geographical location of ethnic minorities in Vietnam means that their limited reachability often delays their reception of appropriate physical support. When interviewed, some local authorities expressed:

*People who are directly engaged in the implementation of poverty reduction programmes like us should be able to vision challenges during the transferring of governmental support into almost unreachable areas where ethnic minorities settle, usually the communes lie among high mountainous slope or deep in the woods and reserve little connection with the outside world.*

Taking a comprehensive look at the overall situation, especially in the context of Son La province, the suggestions above mostly aim at taking advantage of internal community resources to produce desirable results. Although the notion forming these recommendations has not been widely recognized by people who are directly involved, the feasibility of them can be demonstrated by time and by the actual performance of poor households in the process. It is imperative that the ABCD concept is introduced and applied nationwide to poverty reduction. This approach is mostly useful when it is combined with other poverty reduction methods, as its main features focussing upon internal assets will perfectly compliment the implementation of current policies with their focus upon external assets and the external environment.

#### ***7.4.4. Reflection upon the conceptual framework:***

It is important to assess the usefulness of the proposed conceptual framework. As noted by Winther, ([2015: 112](#)), civic empowerment enables people to develop

knowledge, skills and confidence so they can analyse and identify issues. The issues can be addressed through collecting a set of actions which maintain that effective development outcomes can only be achieved when people gain a critical awareness of their position:

*Sustainable poverty elimination will be achieved only if external support focuses on what matters to people, understands the differences between groups of people and works with them in a way that is congruent with their current livelihood strategies, social environment and ability to adapt. Poor people themselves must be key actors in identifying and addressing livelihood priorities. Outsiders need processes that enable them to listen and respond to the poor.*

*Poverty elimination is an enormous challenge that will only be overcome by working at multiple levels, ensuring that micro-level activity informs the development of policy and an effective enabling environment, and that macro-level structures and processes support people to build upon their own strengths.*

*External support must recognise the dynamic nature of livelihood strategies, respond flexibly to changes in people's situation, and develop longer-term commitments (Ashley et al. 1999: 7).*

*outside resources will be much more effectively used if the local community is itself fully mobilized and invested, and if it can define the agendas for which additional resources must be obtained. The assets within lower income communities, in other words, are absolutely necessary but usually not sufficient to meet the huge development challenges ahead (McKnight and Kretzmann 1993: 8).*

When discussing the role and impact of poverty reduction policies and programmes in Son La, participants had mixed views of their success or otherwise. Despite a largely unsuccessful role in poverty reduction, the policies have contributed to the

improvement of uniformity between different ethnic groups, for example Kinh people and other minorities. As said by one participant:

*Actually, there have been many action plans approval with a view to reduce poverty. These plans diversify in its focus on various aspects including infant treatment policy, educational policy as well as financial support and accommodation provision for poor households*

*In fact, in our current policies, we have got so many policies regarding MDP. They have covered all aspects of life, from the policy for newly-born children being treated without fees to policy for poor pupils going to school being exempted from school fees and provided with food allowances and housing policy for the poor*

#### *Seizing outside resources*

According to Collver ([2013](#)) ABCD rest on two foundations. The first draws on evidence to support the notion that any significant community development can only take place when community members are directly supplied with the necessary resources for an effective development process ([McKnight and Kretzmann 1993](#)). The second foundation is that the development of internal resources is necessary for external resources to be utilised sustainably to enable community development ([McKnight and Kretzmann 1993](#)). Only a small number of implementers are of the opinion that local residents can totally execute evolutionary changes in their living conditions without governmental and external support. Rather, the majority argue that the indigenous people of the north-west region of Vietnam do have the necessary internal assets to overcome poverty, but in order to materialize this action, the support of different levels of external authorities is essential to stimulate the sustainable process of long-lasting community development. As one commune leader put it::

*We have skills, but the role of government is significant in assisting us in the vocational training. This training will help us become more aware of*

*technical advancement. Local authorities play a huge part in the orientation and consultation so that we clearly figure out the next step to utilize assets on our own habitat. Say, last year Miss Hanh from the Department of Agriculture came and showed us which industry trees are suitable in our area, such as such as tea, cassava, and flowers and how to take care of them.*

In conclusion, ABCD is a distinctive approach from other forms of community development. From the outset it views the strengths and weaknesses within the community as central to that community's sustainable development, as opposed to a total reliance upon outside 'experts' (Jewell 2016: 95). This thesis argues overall that the ABCD approach, which is an asset-based method for sustainable poverty reduction in the long-term, could be highly significant, in combination with other 'external' policies, to mitigate poverty in remote areas throughout Son La province and amongst ethnic minorities who are predominant there.

## APPENDIX

**Table 1: List of interviewees**

	<b>Code</b>	<b>Date of interview</b>	<b>Place of interview</b>	<b>Position of interviewee</b>
1	LR01	14th, December, 2013	Chieng Ngan commune	Resident
2	LR02	14th, December, 2013	Chieng Ngan commune	Resident
3	LR03	15th, December, 2013	Chieng Ngan commune	Resident
4	LR04	16th, December, 2013	Chieng Ngan commune	Resident
5	LR05	16th, December, 2013	Chieng Ngan commune	Resident
6	LR06	16th, December, 2013	Chieng Ngan commune	Resident
7	LR07	16th, December, 2013	Chieng Ngan commune	Resident
8	LR08	18th, December, 2013	Chieng Ngan commune	Resident
9	LR09	17th, July, 2013	Chieng Ngan commune	Resident
10	LR10	12nd, July, 2013	Chieng Ngan commune	Resident
11	LR11	23rd, July, 2013	Phong Lai commune	Resident
12	LR12	22nd, July, 2013	Phong Lai commune	Resident
13	LR13	22nd, July, 2013	Phong Lai commune	Resident
14	LR14	23rd, July, 2013	Phong Lai commune	Resident
15	LR15	23rd, July, 2013	Phong Lai commune	Resident
16	LR16	23rd, July, 2013	Phong Lai commune	Resident
17	LR17	5th, January, 2014	Chieng Bom commune	Resident
18	LR18	5th, January, 2014	Chieng Bom commune	Resident
19	LR19	5th, January, 2014	Chieng Bom commune	Resident
20	LR20	5th, January, 2014	Chieng Bom commune	Resident
21	LR21	5th, January, 2014	Chieng Bom commune	Resident
22	LR22	6th, January, 2014	Chieng Bom commune	Resident
23	LR23	6th, January, 2014	Chieng Bom commune	Resident
24	LR24	9th, January, 2014	Nam Lau commune	Resident

	<b>Code</b>	<b>Date of interview</b>	<b>Place of interview</b>	<b>Position of interviewee</b>
25	LR25	9th, January, 2014	Nam Lau commune	Resident
26	LR26	8th, January, 2014	Nam Lau commune	Resident
27	LR27	8th, January, 2014	Nam Lau commune	Resident
28	LR28	14th, January, 2014	Nam Lau commune	Resident
29	LR29	14th, January, 2014	Nam Lau commune	Resident
30	LR30	15th, January, 2014	Nam Lau commune	Resident
31	LR32	17th, January, 2014	Nam Lau commune	Resident
32	LR33	26th, June, 2015	Muong Giang commune	Resident
33	LR34	14th, January, 2014	Chieng Hac commune	Resident
34	LR35	14th, January, 2014	Chieng Hac commune	Resident
35	LR36	14th, January, 2014	Chieng Hac commune	Resident
36	PO01	25th, July, 2013	Son La city	Province officer
37	PO02	25th, July, 2013	Son La city	Province officer
38	PO03	26th, December, 2013	Son La city	Province officer
39	PO04	8th, January, 2014	Son La city	Province officer
40	PO05	6th, January, 2014	Son La city	Province officer
41	PO06	7th, January, 2014	Son La city	Province officer
42	DO01	17th, January, 2014	Son La city	The director of department at Province level
43	DO02	17th, January, 2014	Son La city	The director of department at Province level
44	EP01	15th, January, 2014	Son La city	Expert working in the poverty reduction department of Son La province.



	<b>Code</b>	<b>Date of interview</b>	<b>Place of interview</b>	<b>Position of interviewee</b>
45	EP02	15th, January, 2014	Son La city	Researcher at Tay Bac university
46	EP03	16th, January, 2014	Son La city	Researcher at Tay Bac university
47	EP04	16th, January, 2014	Son La city	NGO officers - Who are working in Son La province.
48	LD01	15th, July, 2013	Son La city	Leader of Son La city
49	LD02	15th, July, 2013	Son La city	Leader of Son La city
50	LD03	7th, January, 2014	Son La city	Leader of Son La city
51	LD04	7th, January, 2014	Thuan Chau district	Leader of Thuan Chau District
52	LD05	7th, January, 2014	Thuan Chau district	Official of Thuan Chau district
53	LD06	8th, January, 2014	Thuan Chau district	Official of Thuan Chau district
54	LD06	14th, January, 2014	Moc Chau district	Official of Moc Chau district
55	LD07	14th, January, 2014	Moc Chau district	Official of Moc Chau district

	<b>Code</b>	<b>Date of interview</b>	<b>Place of interview</b>	<b>Position of interviewee</b>
56	LD08	14th, January, 2014	Moc Chau district	Leader of Moc Chau District
57	SC01	15th, July, 2013	Nam Lau commune	Leader of Nam Lau commune
58	SC02	14th, January, 2014	Chieng Ngan commune	Leader of Chieng Ngan commune
59	SC03	15th, June, 2015	Phong Lai commune	Leader of Phong Lai commune
60	SC04	18th, June, 2015	Chieng Hac commune	Leader of Chieng Hac commune
61	SC05	6th, June, 2014	Chieng Bom commune	Former leader of Chieng Bom commune
62	SC06	28th, July, 2013	Phong Lai commune	Leader of Phong Lai commune
63	SC07	28th, July, 2013	Phong Lai commune	Leader of Phong Lai commune

**Table 2: List of Focus group discussion**

	<b>Code</b>	<b>Date of interview</b>	<b>Place of interview</b>
1	FGDs01	13rd, June, 2013	Phong Lai commune
2	FGDs02	26th, December, 2013	Chieng Bom commune
3	FGDs03	14th, January, 2014	Nam Lau commune
4	FGDs04	December, 2013	Chieng Hac commune

**Table 3: List of poverty policy of Vietnam government**

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Signed dated</b>	<b>Kind of document</b>	<b>Issuing Agency</b>	<b>Content</b>
1	No. No.1592/Q Đ-TTg	12th October 2009	Decision	The Prime Minister	On constant implementation of support policies on production land, residential land and potable water for poor ethnic minority households up to 2010
2	167/2008/Q Đ-TTg	12/12/2008	Decision	The Prime Minister	On assistance policy for housing to poor households under the poverty criteria for the period 2011 – 2015

### **Appendix 3: Poverty reduction programmes and policies are applied in Son La province since up to 2015 for the poor and Ethnic minority groups.**

#### **I. Cross cutting poverty reduction and projects:**

1. Socio-economuc programmes for extremely difficult communes in Ethnic minority and Moutainous Areas (P135) (Decision No.07/2008/QD-TTg on 10/01/2006).
2. National Target programme for poverty reduction 2006-2010 (NTP-PR) (Decision 20/2007/QD-TTg on 05/02/2007)
3. Rapid and Sustainable Poverty reduction Programme for the 62 porest districts (Resolution 30a/2008/NQ-CP on 27/12/2008)

#### **II. Sector specific policies:**

1. Support for access to land, housing and access to water (P134) ( Decision 134/2004/QD-TTg dated on 20/7/2004).
2. Housing support for poor households (Decision 167/2008/QD-TTg on 12/12/2008).
3. Suppport on boarding schools for Ethnic minority students. (Circular 109/2009/TTLT-BTC-BGDDT on 29/05/2009).
4. Scholarship and social aid for ethnic minority students (Circular no.43/2007/TTLT-BTC-BGDDT on 02/5/2007)
5. Five million hectares reforestration programme (Decision no.661/QD-TTg 1998).
6. Healthcare for the poor (Decision 139/2002/QD-TTg on 15/10/2002.

#### **III. National projects with poverty impact:**

1. National target programme on rural water supply and santination (RWSS) ( Decision 7/2006/QD-TTg on 11/12/2006).
2. Education for all

#### Appendix 4: Photos from fieldwork in 5 research sites



**The road to Pom village**





**Rice field**

**Group 1: Chiêng Ngan Commune, Son La city**





**Inside the house of Black Thai Ethnic minority in Lai Bay village, Phong Lai commune, Thuan Chau District**





**The road to Lai Bay, Pa Chap village**



**Cassava field**





**Corn field**



**"Cattle house" under the floor of Pole house of Thai people  
Group 2: Phong Lai Commune, Thuan Chau District**

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